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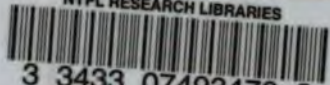
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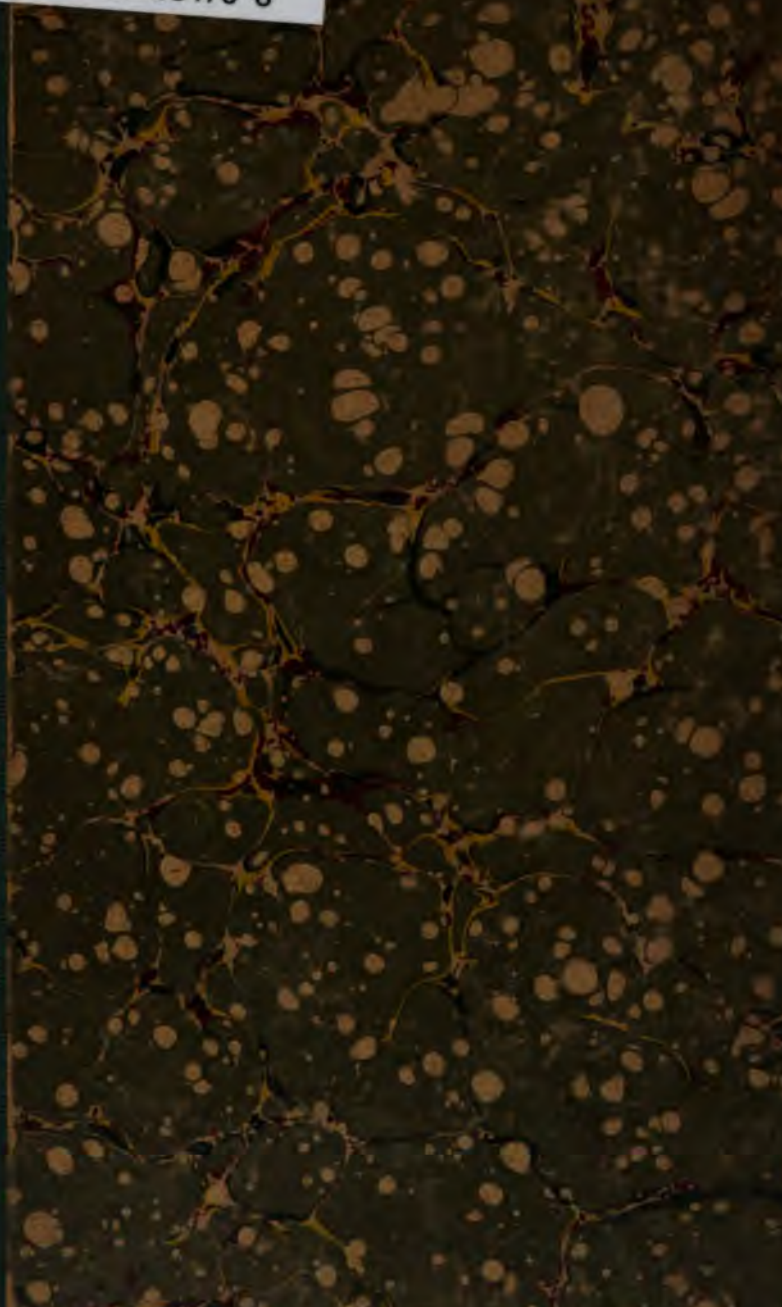
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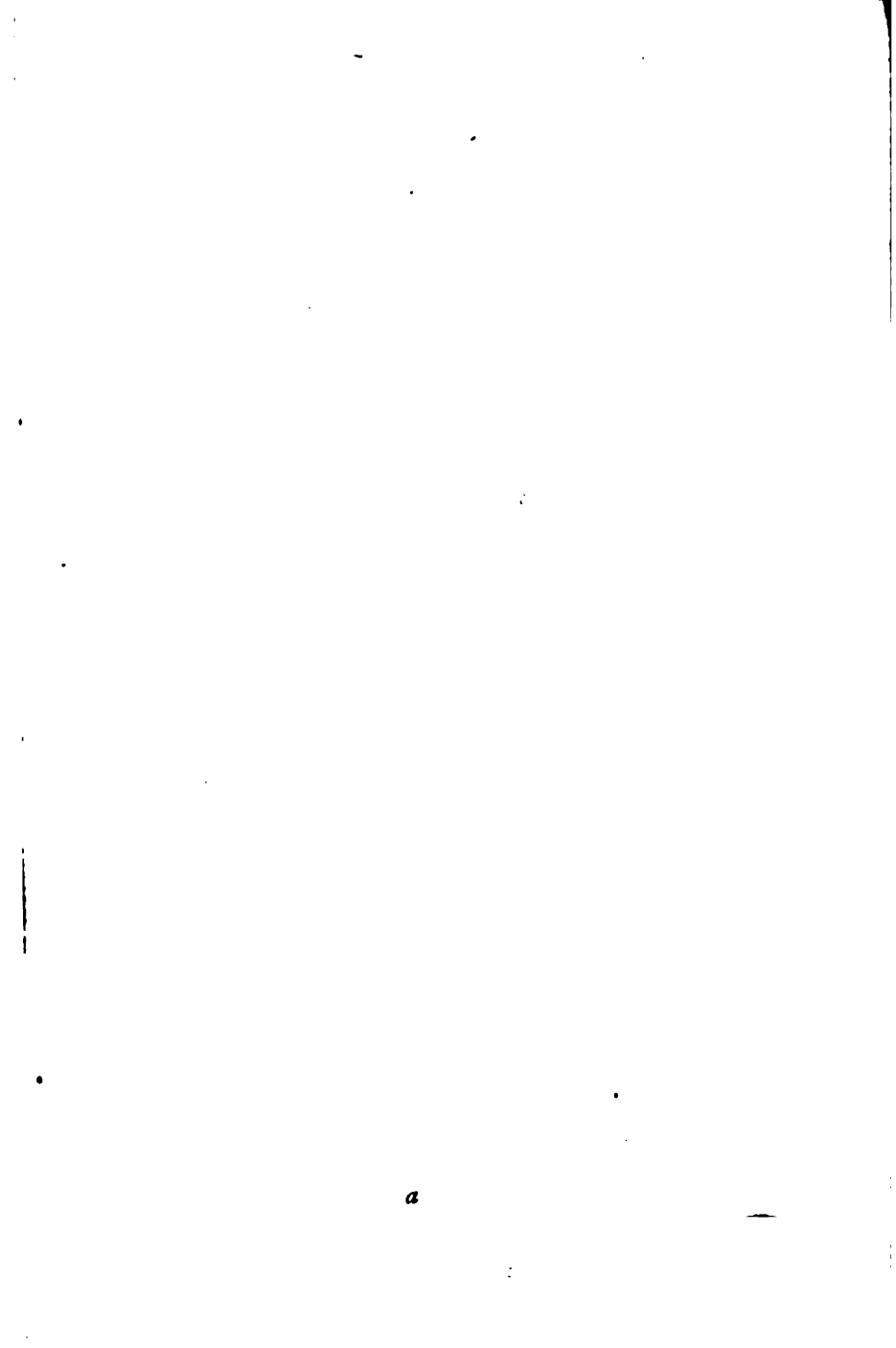
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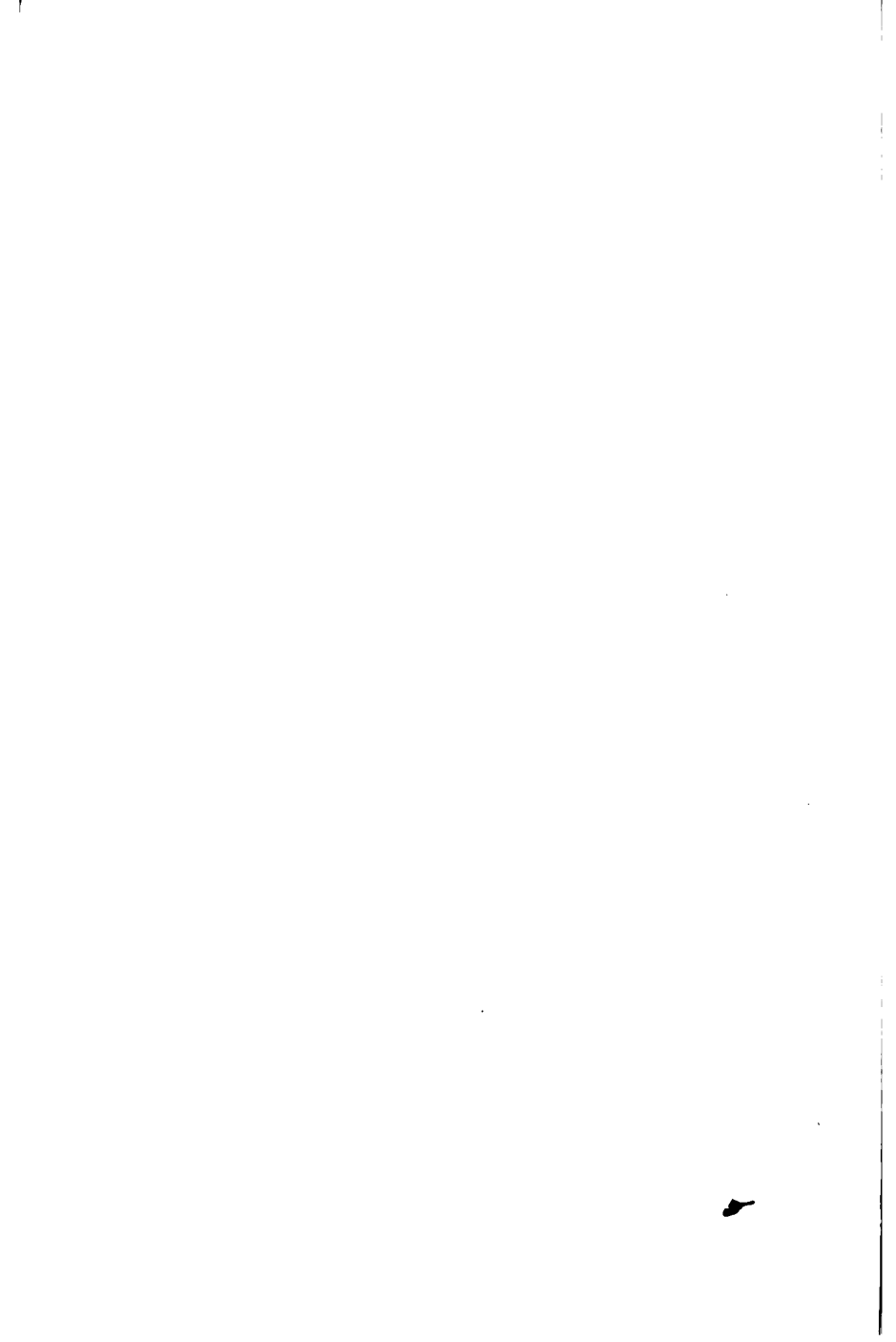




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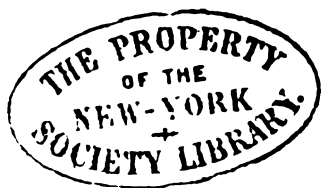
Author of 'A Difficult Matter,' 'A Fair Fraud,'
'The Craze of Christina,' Etc., Etc.

R

'For something came between them, something thin as a cobweb.' . . .

. . . 'Ah! man's pride, or woman's—which is greatest? most averse to
brushing cobwebs?—well, but she and he remained fast friends.'

Aurora Leigh.



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London

John Long

6 Chandos Street, Strand

1899

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CONTENTS

CHAP.	PAGE
I. THE LADY OF MEADOWLANDS,	1
II. HER NEIGHBOUR,	20
III. A GIRL FROM AUSTRALIA,	36
IV. THE ARRIVAL OF DELIA,	51
V. AN UNLUCKY ACCIDENT,	64
VI. 'IDLE HANDS,'	80
VII. DRIFTING APART,	95
VIII. BERNARD TO THE RESCUE,	111
IX. LADY DRUMSEL'S ADVICE,	128
X. A MORNING ON THE RIVER,	141
XI. IN STORM AND CRISIS,	156
XII. STOLEN GOODS,	174
XIII. MARRIED IN HASTE,	190

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Contents

CHAP.	PAGE
XIV. DROWNING CARE,	206
XV. MRS JOHNSON'S MIND IS RELIEVED,	220
XVI. REPENTING AT LEISURE,	231
XVII. UNVARNISHED TRUTHS,	245
XVIII. THE LOVERS BY THE GATE,	262
XIX. 'TOO LATE,'	274
XX. A PROJECT OF PLEASURE,	283
XXI. MISSING,	295
XXII. A LONG NIGHT AND CONFESSIONS,	306
XXIII. THE FATE OF THE <i>MERMAID</i> ,	315

A Passing Fancy

CHAPTER I

THE LADY OF MEADOWLANDS

AMBROSIA DOYNE was one of those fortunate people upon whom the kindly hand of Time seems to have left little or no noticeable trace.

When the indisputable fact is mentioned that she was the mother of a son of two-and-twenty, it will be understood at once that Mrs Doyne was no longer in her first youth. Yet so little was this fact borne in mind by her numerous friends that, in the fortuitously frequent absences of this incontrovertible evidence of her actual age, it is doubtful whether any of them remembered it at all. Her radiant personality was indissolubly interwoven with health and energy and good looks—with all, in fact, that renders youth attractive and delightful.

Let it be understood at once that Mrs

A Passing Fancy

Doyne was perfectly and absolutely natural. Art, save in the matter of tasteful and well-made clothes, had nothing to do with her. The charming tints of her still blooming complexion owed nothing to powder or to paint, nor had any patented decoction been called upon to preserve the rich bronze-gold tints of hair, which was of that fortunate shade that is the very last to fade from the glory of its youth. Nature had been very kind to Ambrosia Doyne, for, in addition to this gift of an almost perennial youth, she had endowed her with a magnificent constitution, and with a brave spirit which hardly ever broke down. Yet to those who watched her most, and who loved her best—and it may be remarked in passing that her son Bernard was not amongst them—Ambrosia's eyes sometimes appeared a little tired and weary, as though the struggle of her life were somewhat hard to keep up. For if Nature had been good to her, Life had been decidedly cruel.

Her early years had opened brightly enough. An only child, beloved and spoilt by doting parents from her cradle to her marriage day, she was seemingly but ill-fitted for the misfortune that so soon overwhelmed the happy promise of her girlhood.

The Lady of Meadowlands

Ambrosia married at eighteen, and her two years of married life proved disastrous. When she was just over twenty, she returned a widow to her father's house with a year-old infant in her arms. What she had gone through during her brief married life no one—not even her mother—ever exactly knew, because she was strangely reticent about her experiences; but it is quite certain that those two years had been a time of terror and despair to her, and that the girlish affection she had given to her little-known bridegroom had been quickly transformed into loathing and hatred, so that the tragedy of his self-inflicted death had brought an end not altogether to be deplored to a union which had not had in it one single element of peace or happiness.

She came back to Meadowlands a little harder, a little quieter, perhaps, than she had gone away on her wedding day, but unaltered in all other ways, and not by any means heart-broken. Her heart, as a matter of fact, had never really been touched, her pride had been outraged and wounded, her taste and refinement of feeling had been shocked and disgusted, but her heart had not bled nor suffered, because the misplaced fancy of her youth had very speedily collapsed into dust and ashes.

A Passing Fancy

Three days after her marriage, Ambrosia had realised that Anthony Doyne in no way resembled the man she had believed him to be, who was indeed nothing but the creation of her own imagination, and had never had any real existence at all; and she had discovered at the same time that she did not love him in the very least. This, in the light of subsequent events, was the most fortunate discovery she could possibly have made, and it was probably the reason why the terrible history of her married life left no appreciable after traces upon her. More genuine sorrows were the deaths of her parents, which occurred within a year of each other, six and seven years after her own return to the paternal roof. At their death, Ambrosia passed quietly into possession of the house where she was born, and there she continued to live, mercifully altogether free from financial cares, gathering year by year a little circle of devoted friends about her, of whom she soon became the life and centre.

Nothing, in fact, was complete without her. No scheme could be set on foot, either of pleasure or of usefulness, without her help and collaboration. Whether it was a bazaar or a picnic, a county ball or a village tea, Ambrosia

The Lady of Meadowlands

was ever the moving and directing spirit, the chief pillar and support, and very often the instigator and promoter as well of it all. Her spirit was indomitable, her physical energy inexhaustible. Without any apparent effort, she joined in all the amusements and occupations of women who were half her own age. She rode to hounds, she boated, she played tennis, she danced—all like a girl of twenty—and flung herself into the newest fads of the day, such as golf and bicycling, with an ardour as fresh and as genuine as that of the girls about her. And whatever she took up she usually excelled in. If she was not actually the best, at anyrate she could always hold her own. There was no pretence about her youthfulness, no playing at being young—because she *was* young, and that in spite of that grown-up son in the background.

Now, with regard to that son, there is something that must be said. Even those who admired and loved Mrs Doyne the most, were forced to admit that she was not, and never had been, a devoted mother. She knew it herself; and the knowledge often filled her with deep contrition. But love is not to be constrained, and although she had struggled to love Bernard, she had unfortunately never

A Passing Fancy

been able to succeed in doing so heartily ; it was a fair imitation of love, perhaps, but it was not the real thing.

Even as an infant she had not been able to care for him. His very existence was an offence to her, for if he was hers he was also her husband's, and the fact that this living reminder of the most stupendous failure which a woman can make, survived to mock her constantly with the hateful memories of a time she would only too gladly have forgotten, seemed to her to place the child for ever outside of her sympathy and her affection. Do what she would, she *could* not love him. As he grew older the boy still further alienated himself from his mother—he resembled his dead father—selfishness and a brutal disregard for the feelings of others began to betray themselves as the main features of his character. There was a certain cruelty and coarseness about him, and his moral sense was decidedly low. Nevertheless, Ambrosia did her duty by the boy. He was carefully educated, and was sent in due course to Eton and to Oxford—the former was unable to imbue him with gentlemanly feelings, although it was fairly successful in covering up his more unattractive points with a thin veneer of good

The Lady of Meadowlands

manners—whilst the latter only seemed to foster and encourage the faults and weaknesses which he evidently inherited from his father. Ambrosia used to think that if he had turned to her with something of a son's affection, that then her heart would have warmed to him—but Bernard's regard for his mother was founded entirely upon selfish cupidity. As long as he could get money out of her, he was fairly civil to her; she was to him merely the money machine, whom it behoved him for his own sake to propitiate.

He propitiated her when it suited him to do so, at other times he ignored her entirely. And so, wounded and sore, she withdrew herself more and more from him, keeping the peace indeed outwardly with him for the sake of the world, but resenting his attitude towards her with all the strength of her being. He was a pain to her all through.

And yet Bernard Doyne was by no means altogether bad. His faults were as yet faults only, and not vices. He was aware that his father had been a drunkard, and was on his guard against excess in that direction; and if he was hopelessly extravagant, he was at any-rate not mean—the only meanness he displayed was towards his mother. Moreover, he was

A Passing Fancy

no fool. He had considerable capabilities and a fair amount of perseverance, and he was in addition excessively good-looking, a son of whom, as far as appearance goes, any mother might have been proud. At the present moment he was reading for the Bar in London, and the only letters his mother received from him were invariably on the same topic. He had exceeded his allowance and must have more money at once. For the sake of peace, Ambrosia usually sent it. But such applications, couched as they were invariably in crude and inconsiderate words, had the effect of hardening her just a very little more each time against him. Bernard was one of those people who rarely say 'please' and never say 'thank you.' All the virtues of which humanity is capable are as nought in a woman's eyes, in comparison with this elementary deficiency.

One wet morning in the month of May, Ambrosia stood looking out of her drawing-room window. She was waiting, somewhat impatiently, for an answer to a verbal message which she had sent to her nearest neighbour by one of her gardeners.

The message had been simply this :—

'Go to the Grange and say that Mrs Doyne will be much obliged to Mr Hatton

The Lady of Meadowlands

if he will come round and see her as soon as possible.'

The message had been taken round by road some three-quarters of a mile from door to door, but Mrs Doyne was waiting for the reply by river, a route that was less than half that distance, and whilst she stands watching and waiting at her window, let us too look out and take note of the prospect that was to her the most familiar on earth.

Meadowlands house stood, as its name implies, in a green and pleasant country. From the stone terrace outside the house the dappled velvet of the lawn sloped gently down towards the river—a river that we may call the Laze, although it will not be found on any map under that name. It was a charming winding stream that rippled on its placid way between overhanging willows and flower-spangled banks, delightful at all times to row or to punt upon, and at divers seasons full of jack and barbel and dace, and other fish desirable to the soul of the fisherman. Beyond the river lay wide green meadows, dotted over with cattle in the summer months, adorned by clumps of fine trees, and bounded in the distance by a low line of wooded hills. As far as this distant boundary, all that the eye could see belonged to

A Passing Fancy

Ambrosia. The gardens lay to the left of the house, and were now bright with red and yellow tulips, whilst the chestnut trees and the lilacs were just bursting into bloom, and every plant and shrub had arrayed itself in the tender greenery of early summer.

Yet this was not all that could be seen from the windows of the house, nor, it may be added, did the pleasant prospect just described contain, by any means, the most interesting object of the view in Mrs Doyne's opinion. This object was a house, the house of her nearest neighbour, Mr Laurence Hatton.

If, standing where Ambrosia stands this morning, you carry your eyes away to the right along the in-curved crescent of the willow-bordered stream, they will very soon come to a wooded knoll or promontory in the landscape, it is scarcely to be called a hill, and there, crowning the gentle acclivity, stands a very old, long, low grey stone house, nearly smothered in clustering ivy and deeply shaded by the magnificent elms and beeches which stand closely behind it. The mullioned windows of the grey old Grange look back towards those of its more modern neighbour, for Meadowlands is of the Georgian period, and is built of red brick, with large oblong

The Lady of Meadowlands

windows deeply coped with white stone, and the Grange might well out of its venerable antiquity look down with indulgent contempt upon so recent a creation as Meadowlands, for there is no record as to when the Grange was built ; it was, in fact, one of the very oldest moderate-sized gentlemen's houses in England, and dated from that remote time when country houses first began to supersede the strong castles of defence which were needed in the more turbulent days of English history.

We are not, however, concerned with the early history of the Grange, but with the story of him who now lived in it. Laurence Hatton had inherited the old house at his father's death some years ago, and had been very well content to live there all the year round ever since. There had been Hattons at Hatton Grange for over three hundred years, and there was in his mind a certain pride in the rare and respectable fact that he had succeeded to an unbroken line of country squires of irreproachable lives and morals, who had ever been moreover of staunch and loyal politics. 'For king and country' was the family motto, and no Hatton had ever yet swerved from that simple yet splendid creed. All the men of Laurence Hatton's race had

A Passing Fancy

been brave and loyal, and all the women had been true and pure. There was no disgrace—no bar sinister on the family escutcheon.

As a rule each Hatton when he came to man's estate had married, as his father had done before him, into some family as old and as honourable as his own, selecting his wife with care and circumspection : for it was almost a religion with the Hattons that their wives should excel in all womanly perfections and graces, that they should be young and healthy, physically fitted to bear children worthy to succeed them, and that they should be qualified by the virtues of their characters to train and guide the young minds whom they should bring into the world.

The present owner of the Grange had, however, deviated somewhat from the family traditions. Laurence was over thirty and he was still unmarried. The cause was not far to seek ; it was to be found at Meadowlands, and was universally known and recognised. It was an open secret, in short, that Laurence had ever since his boyhood worshipped, and worshipped vainly, at the feet of Ambrosia Doyne.

He was but a child at the time that the young widow and her infant returned to her girlhood's home, for Laurence was ten years

The Lady of Meadowlands

her junior, yet, even then, in the silent adoration of the grave-faced, large-eyed little fellow who ran her errands, and deemed no joy so great as to be allowed to wait upon her, Ambrosia had recognised one of those ardent souls who lay their lives for ever upon an unattainable shrine. Naturally, this childish devotion had amused rather than interested her at first; yet, as the years went on, and the child grew into the lad, and the lad into the man, things assumed a more serious complexion, for there was no diminution in young Hatton's worship—nay, rather it grew and increased in intensity year by year. When he was twenty-one, Laurence made his first proposal to her in due form, and not unnaturally she had laughed him to scorn.

‘My dear boy, I am ten years older than you are, and I am a widow! How can you be so ridiculous? Go away and find someone else!’

‘That is no answer, none at all,’ had replied the boy, standing up before her, strong and grave and earnest. ‘Tell me that you dislike me, and I will go away and never trouble you again.’

‘Oh, but I cannot tell you that, Lorry! I like you very much indeed! I am very fond

A Passing Fancy

of you, my dear boy ; but as to marrying you, it would be absurd !'

'I see no absurdity whatever,' he had replied doggedly ; 'and as long as you do not hate me I shall continue to hope.'

'But I am ten years older,' she reiterated.

He waved away the words with a quick gesture—how familiar that same gesture had become to her since then !

'If you were fifty years older than I am, it would make no difference to me,' he had answered with warmth ; 'you are the only woman on earth for me, and I don't want to marry any other.'

She had put him off at the time with vague and friendly words that yet were full of something almost akin to contempt—a something of which he was acutely conscious and which had made him set his teeth hard in an obstinate determination to overcome her opposition at the last.

She believed that the subject was closed and done with, and because she liked the boy and he was her nearest neighbour with whom it would be inconvenient to be at war, she quickly resumed the old friendly relations that had always existed between them. Yet it can hardly have been said to surprise her when a

The Lady of Meadowlands

year later he again put forward in words his unaltered desire to marry her.

‘I thought we had had all that out long ago, Lorry! Did I not give you an answer last year to that foolish question?’

Her words, though reproachful, were no longer mocking, the sting of her scorn was taken out of them, and Hatton was not slow to mark and take hope from this.

‘A year might easily make all the difference,’ he remarked; ‘women are changeable.’

‘And men are not, I suppose?’

‘Men are not.’

A little silence. They were in the boat together under the willows that day. Ambrosia trailed her white hand in the rippling water and gazed down over the gunwale at the darting silver of myriads of shooting atoms.

‘Won’t you marry me, Ambrosia?’ he asked softly, bending forward to her over the sculls that lay crossed upon his knees.

She looked up at him quickly. There was a sudden startled flash in her beautiful gold brown eyes—eyes that almost matched the warm tones of her rippling hair—it was as though something new in him had revealed itself to her, a something which surprised her. ●

A Passing Fancy

‘No, Lorry,’ she answered simply, but she laughed at him no longer.

‘And for the same reasons?’

She nodded. ‘For the same reasons.’

‘All right. Then we’ll go on again,’ and he replaced the oars into the rowlocks and sculled the boat steadily up stream as though no interruption had occurred.

Since then he had asked her the same question always once every year—and latterly he had asked it very much oftener than once a year, but he had never as yet received any other reply from her than that same gentle and seemingly hopeless ‘No.’

It grew at last into a time-honoured custom between them. Sometimes Ambrosia would cry out suddenly,—

‘Now you are not going to propose, are you, Lorry?’ and they would both laugh. ‘Because, if so, I’ll say “No” beforehand!’ she would add merrily.

‘“But nobody asked you, ma’am, he said!”’ he would quote back playfully.

It had almost degenerated into a joke! Almost—not quite. For at the very bottom of their hearts they both knew that the years had wrought a slow and almost imperceptible change—a change so subtle and so intangible

The Lady of Meadowlands

that it was scarce more easy to define than the moonshine and the mists that lay across the valley on midsummer nights between their respective homes.

Yet the change was there. For in these long years the neighbours had been constantly together in a daily intercourse of friendship. Save at the stated intervals when he asked her to marry him, Lorry had made it a rule never to obtrude his love upon her, and even then no word of passion, no suggestion of tenderness or of longing ever crossed his lips—his proposals had been perhaps almost too business-like in their quiet brevity, and he had generally spoken of his love to her in the same unemotional tones in which he might have mentioned the figure of his income. At all other times he never alluded to it at all. They fished, they hunted, they boated together, they played tennis, they rode bicycles, every sport and pastime according to the season was followed side by side, and always he treated her with the tender deference of a subject to a queen, and never did he deviate for one moment from the constant consideration and care with which his every look and action surrounded her. And in time, because every true woman is above all tender at heart, she grew to value this unvary-

A Passing Fancy

ing devotion more highly than any other thing in life. Little by little, she learnt to turn to him in every difficulty, to consult him in every trouble, to rest upon his advice, and to form her own opinions upon his. The support she might have had from her son, had he been a different man, she found in her faithful friend. And although she still declared to herself and to him that she did not love him in any dearer fashion, she honestly admitted that as a friend he possessed her warmest affection.

Insensibly, too, that gap of ten years between them seemed to have dwindled and be bridged over. It may seem paradoxical to say so, but there is a far greater difference between twenty and thirty than there is between thirty and forty. Moreover, whilst Ambrosia kept young with that delightful perennial youthfulness, which was her chiefest charm, Lorry grew older yearly. There were grey hairs on his dark head by the time he was thirty, and a constant longing after the unattainable had traced a good many lines and wrinkles on a face that had always been grave for his years. In short, the incongruity of their respective ages seemed in these later days to be almost lost sight of, and it was only when Bernard was at home that it assumed anything of its former proportions.

The Lady of Meadowlands

It had come to this that once or twice, in the silence of the night watches and in the very secret depths of her own heart, Ambrosia Doyne had said to herself, 'Perhaps—some day—some day!' Even then the sentence had never been completed.

And she could not guess that away across the meadows, in that silent and grey old house, shrouded in sombre ivy, Laurence Hatton had murmured bitterly more than once in his heart of hearts,—

'My God! can a man go on like this for ever?—for ever?'

CHAPTER II

HER NEIGHBOUR

ALTHOUGH it rained heavily, Ambrosia stood watching the bend of the river from her drawing-room window. She had said 'come quickly,' therefore she knew that he would come in the boat, for it would take him longer to come round by the road. She was not disappointed. Presently the dinghy with her mackintoshed occupant shot out from under the trees that overhung the Grange boat-house, and in a very few minutes Hatton was tying up his craft to the landing-stage at her own garden.

She went out to meet him at the door that opened on to the lawn ; that was never locked.

'How wet you are, Lorry.'

'Yes, it does pour, doesn't it?'

'Why didn't you have the brougham out?'

'Well, you wanted me quickly, you said.'

There was a gleam of satisfaction in her eyes. Womanlike, Ambrosia liked to hear flattering

Her Neighbour

things put into words, actions were never enough for her without their verbal confirmation.

‘Well, come in now.’ He hung up his hat and dripping mackintosh in the vestibule and followed her into the drawing-room. These two rarely said ‘good morning’ and ‘good-bye’—they had so many other more pressing things to say, I suppose.

‘What is it?’ he asked.

‘A letter from Bernard,’ she replied, holding up her hand with a letter clasped in it.

‘Very much as usual, I suppose?’

‘No. That’s the wonderful part of it, it is not at all as usual, or perhaps I ought to say it is very much more than usual; that’s why I sent for you.’

‘Serious?’ Lorry was a man of few words.

‘Very serious,’ she replied. She had caught something of his own brevity.

‘Am I to read it?’ holding out his hand.

‘Yes, certainly. Only—I want to prepare you a bit; you will be surprised.’

‘Disagreeably surprised, I imagine.’

‘Probably; but I hardly know—it may strike you as a blessing in disguise. I—I rather want to know exactly how it will strike you. Read it to yourself and tell me.’

A Passing Fancy

Hatton took the letter and walked away with it to the window, turning his back upon her as he opened it. Mrs Doyne sat down on the arm of a chair and watched him—or rather she watched his back, for nothing of his face was visible. She knew him so well that she thought she could almost read the thoughts of his mind from the attitude of his shoulders and his head. There is often a great deal of expression in the backs of things. Lorry's shoulders were broad and strong—he was not very tall—he was indeed no taller than Ambrosia, but he was well knit and well made. His head was sleek and neat, the sit of his collar irreproachable, as was also the country suit of Harris tweed that he wore. The thought went through her mind that although he was not nearly such a handsome fellow as her son was, yet what a difference there was between them, and how much more pleasure it gave her to see Lorry in her house than Bernard! This was the kind of ill-regulated thought that Ambrosia was constantly thinking.

Meanwhile Hatton was reading Bernard Doyne's letter. He had read a great many of this young gentleman's effusions, yet never possibly had he read any of them with a

Her Neighbour

greater amount of attention than this one.
This was the letter:—

‘DEAR MOTHER, — Perhaps you will be surprised to hear that I’m engaged to be married to Miss Delia Goddard, who has been staying lately with my friends the Johnsons in Eccleston Square. I have met Miss Goddard at several dances, and last night I proposed to her and she accepted me. She is without exception the prettiest girl I ever saw, and you are sure to admire her immensely. She is only nineteen, but has already been tremendously run after ; in fact, there were two other fellows, friends of mine, also after her, which has rather precipitated matters, as you may imagine. However, it’s all settled now, and she has accepted me. Delia’s people live in Australia—or perhaps it is New Zealand—she did tell me, but I really can’t quite remember which she said. Anyhow, she has a lot of young brothers and sisters, and her father and mother have a ranche or a vineyard or something out there, and as Delia is the eldest she has been sent home on a long visit to the Johnsons to see a little London life. Mrs Johnson is a cousin of her mother’s, and is Delia’s godmother. I expect they all want

A Passing Fancy

her to marry, and she doesn't in the least want to go back to Australia—or New Zealand, or wherever it is—as her father's place is quite in the country, and very dull. She is writing to her parents to-day, but she says they are quite sure to be delighted to hear that she is going to be married, so there will be no trouble in that way. What I chiefly want you to do, my dear mother, is to write to her at once to 101 Eccleston Square, and ask her down to Meadowlands next week. The Johnsons have just let the house for the season and are going abroad for two months, and they can't very well take Delia with them, so I have told her she can spend her summer with you, and I will come down for Sundays, and as soon as I can get through this wretched exam. I'll come down and stop altogether. By the way, we want to be married in August—about the fifteenth, I think—so will you please see about money arrangements? I must, of course, have a very much larger allowance—sufficient, in fact, to support my wife as a lady. I can just rub along on my present allowance till August, then we can begin the new arrangement on my wedding day. I think the Johnsons will be home by then, so that we

Her Neighbour

can be married from Eccleston Square, but of course it will be nicer for Delia to stay with you till they come back. She says she could go down to you next Tuesday. The Johnsons start for Homburg on Wednesday, so please write to her by return as she wants to settle her plans.—Your affectionate son, \ BERNARD DOYNE.'

When Hatton had read this letter carefully through once, he turned back to the beginning and read it all over again. After which he turned slowly round and faced Ambrosia. 'What infernal cool cheek!' he ejaculated, and Ambrosia could see that he was very angry.

'Bernard is apt to be cool and cheeky!' she replied, smiling faintly. 'But, after all, marriage may be the making of him.'

'That very much depends on who she is. What does he know about this girl?'

'Very little apparently.'

'And these "people" of hers, who live either in Australia or New Zealand—he talks of them as if they were contiguous counties—Surrey and Berkshire.'

'He is very boyish certainly,' admitted the mother, deprecatingly.

A Passing Fancy

‘Then how in the name of fortune is he going to live? What is he proposing to live upon?’

‘Well, you see what he says.’

‘He is going to live on *you*!’

‘That is evidently his intention,’ and she smiled again slightly.

‘And you, you mean to give in to this preposterous idea?’

‘What else am I to do, Lorry? He is my only son, and I suppose I could manage it somehow. I—wanted you to advise me,’ she added a little piteously.

‘My dear, of course I will advise you.’ He sat down beside her and took possession of her hand, and somehow the unwonted action and the strong pressure of his firm, cool hand seemed of itself to put new courage and life into her.

‘Look here, Lorry,’ she said, ‘before we talk any more, let me just say one thing. You know how utterly powerless I am with Bernard, how little influence I have over him, how absolutely deaf he is to any argument of reason or of right. Well, don’t you think that to oppose him in this matter would be a very false move? I cannot stop him from marrying. He is twenty-two. He can do as he likes.’

Her Neighbour

‘But you can stop his supplies.’

‘Undoubtedly. But do I want to do so? I don’t want to make an enemy of Bernard. I cannot, it is true, turn him into a dutiful or loving son, because it is not in his nature to be one. But at least I can live at peace with him, and I can do what I can to help him to live respectably and comfortably. In whatever else I have failed, I have at least always tried to do my duty by him.’

‘You have always done a great deal too much for him,’ said Lorry, warmly. He could never quite trust himself to speak of Bernard to her. If he had said all he thought of that young gentleman, he might have offended her—and nothing was worth that!

‘You see,’ went on Ambrosia, ‘Bernard is just the kind of boy of whom an early marriage might be the salvation. If the girl is sensible and a lady, and has good principles, and is fond of him, she might do wonders for him. After all, Bernard is not vicious.’

‘No,’ replied Lorry, slowly, ‘he is not vicious. But how do you know that this girl is going to be all this?’ He referred to the letter. ‘All I can find out about her is that she is pretty—and penniless!’

‘Many nice girls are both, Lorry,’ rejoined

A Passing Fancy

Ambrosia, brightly. '*Don't* be cantankerous! I *mean* to make the best of things; at anyrate, I must have her here, she must come and stay.'

'Apparently you are not given a choice in the matter,' he said drily.

'Well, no; that is not Bernard's way.'

Hatton uttered a little snort, it could be hardly called a laugh. Ambrosia interpreted the sound perfectly; she pressed his hand gently.

'*Don't* set your back up, please,' she pleaded, and for all that she was so clever and so self-contained, there was a very womanly admission of weakness in her upturned eyes, for if Lorry quarrelled with Bernard, where would be the whole peace and happiness of her life? 'I know quite well that you would like to speak your mind to him.'

'I would give ten years of my life to do so!'

'But you *won't*, Lorry? you won't?'

'No,' he said, turning upon her with a smile that told her better than words how great was her influence over him. 'No, I won't, of course I won't. And look here, Ambrosia, you talked about this being a "blessing in disguise." Well, perhaps it may be, if only you will consent to make it so.'

Ambrosia looked away out of the window.

Her Neighbour

'It has left off raining, let us go out,' she remarked irrelevantly.

'Now that is the way you always put me off. No, don't get up. You sha'n't get up, Ambrosia! You shall just listen to me first!'

'As if I didn't know perfectly what you are going to say!' she retorted.

'I daresay you do. That won't stop my saying it, though.'

'Three times this year already, Lorry! Really, it's getting too often.'

'Yes, but this time I have a fresh basis to go upon, you see.'

'As how? Well, of course, *any* element of freshness about the same old chestnut will be a boon.'

'Then I have your leave to say it? Will you marry me *now*, Ambrosia?'

'*Now?* to-day? to-morrow? this week? This is freshness indeed with a vengeance!'

'As soon as you like—as to that, Ambrosia; but that was not what my "now" meant. I mean, now that Bernard has found a wife, and wants a home of his own, would it not remove nearly all your previous objections at once?'

'He might want a home—*here*.'

'All the more reason that you should come and make your home at the Grange. Let

A Passing Fancy

these young people marry in August—settle them here or elsewhere—elsewhere for choice, I think—and then just you marry me quietly immediately afterwards. Don't you think I have waited long enough?'

She shook her head slowly. As a matter of fact, she had got into such a habit of saying 'No' to him, that she hardly knew how to say anything else. And Lorry, as usual, committed the error of being just a little too matter-of-fact and business-like in his proposal. She knew very well, of course, that he must love her very much—for did not his whole life prove it to her? And she understood also that his love rested upon the broad and unalterable basis of conviction and of reason. But there are moments in life when women infinitely prefer a divine unreasonableness and a glorious overturning of the conventionalities of life to all the calm and praiseworthy arguments which reason and common sense can bring to bear upon a subject. Had Lorry only had the wit to have given rein to the very real and strong passion which he felt for her, but which he carefully restrained beneath a cool and reserved exterior, it is quite possible that he might have won his point; for although he could not guess it, Ambrosia had never been so near giving

Her Neighbour

in to him before. But he was so fearfully afraid of offending her and frightening her, that he kept a most scrupulous guard upon his feelings, and he did not understand in the least that she would have infinitely preferred a more tempestuous wooing.

There was a little silence between them. Lorry's pulses were beating tumultuously, yet he kept his eyes carefully averted lest she should read too much of his heart in them. Ambrosia, on her part, was saying to herself, 'Why doesn't he *do* something? If he would only have the pluck to take me into his arms, and hold me tight and kiss me—well, I believe I should say "Yes" to him!'

But apparently he had not the pluck. And after a few moments she realised that he would do nothing violently, madly delightful! so her mood changed again and she only made the kind of answer she had made to him a dozen times before.

'Oh, I am much too old to marry you, Lorry. I shall be a grandmother, I daresay, in a year's time, and what a ridiculous match it would be altogether! It has quite stopped raining now; do let us go out. I've got to write to this girl, you know, and to Bernard too. Of course, she must come here on Tuesday. I wonder what

A Passing Fancy

she will be like? You will have to help me to amuse her till Bernard comes down, then I don't suppose she will want either of us. I always did hate an engaged couple in the house, they are so selfish and inconsiderate, and one has to rattle the handles of the doors and clear one's throat before going inadvertently into rooms, for fear of finding them sitting on each other's knees spooning.'

'We might pose as another engaged couple and set them a better example,' suggested Lorry, not very cleverly.

'What, *again*? Oh, come, Lorry, you are really incorrigible to-day! Advise me, pray, instead of talking nonsense. How am I to write to this girl? For write to her I must. My woman's curiosity is awake concerning my future daughter-in-law, and I am really quite anxious to see her; it's an event in one's life, you see! And then there's Bernard. What am I to say to Bernard? How much ought I to give him to marry upon? Had I better make him a larger allowance, or shall I just give him half I possess right away, and tell him he mustn't expect any more till I'm dead?'

'My dear Ambrosia, I cannot allow you to cripple yourself. We must look into things and manage better than that; but do nothing and

Her Neighbour

promise nothing yet—you must see the girl first, and Bernard must get through his examination. Write to him a diplomatic letter—suggest that they should not be married in such a hurry—Christmas would be quite soon enough—and by that time you will be able to tell better how much you can fairly do for them without injury to yourself, which, I am sure, none of your relations would wish—besides which, the engagement might fall through if you give it time!’

‘Ah! now you are sensible and helpful, Lorry,’ she replied gratefully, ‘and of course a sensible man in practical matters is worth all the women put together! Yes, I had certainly better see Miss Goddard first, before deciding anything.’

They were pacing the broad, wet gravel walk by the river’s side by now, and Hatton, recognising of how little avail it was to press his own well-nigh hopeless hopes, did the next best thing he knew how, in throwing himself heart and soul into this new complication of her life. For more than half an hour they talked the matter over in all its bearings.

The fitful sunshine, bright but transient, glistened on the dripping leaves, and mirrored itself on the pools of water along the garden

A Passing Fancy

paths, and when Hatton got back into the dinghy to make his way back to his own house, a little shower of dewdrops fell like diamonds from the pointed leaves of the willow tree as he pushed off into the stream, so that his head and shoulders were soused by the miniature shower, and Ambrosia laughed gaily as she waved him an adieu.

In the days that were to come, Ambrosia was wont to look back to that little scene as a type of all that had been happiest in the familiar contentfulness of her past life, with a passion of bitter and hopeless regret in that she had so wilfully and blindly flung aside the best thing that she had ever possessed. But no prescience of threatening evil warned her at the moment, no voice from the silence of the future was uplifted to tell her that nothing lasts in this sad world—not even the possession of which we believe ourselves to be the most secure.

On the contrary, her thoughts, had they taken to themselves words, would have been framed on a wholly different line.

‘After all’ was what went through her mind as she watched the boat receding swiftly up the river. ‘After all, I have always got Lorry ; however much Bernard may annoy and distress

Her Neighbour

me, he cannot rob me of Lorry; and Lorry's love is something to rest upon always. He is a dear fellow too, though he really might put his case a little better, I think. If he had had just a little wee bit more wit to-day—well—I verily believe, in spite of all the old arguments—his youth, which is no longer so very young—my age, which really doesn't seem to trouble him in the least—I might have—perhaps I might have—'

Her thoughts became chaos for a few moments, whilst a little happy smile played upon her charming face. And a moment later she added aloud,—

'Well, after all, there is plenty of time to repair *that* mistake! Lorry is not likely to run away, and next time—next time—'

And there came no breath from the heaven above to whisper to her the warning, 'Perhaps there may be no next time.'

CHAPTER III

A GIRL FROM AUSTRALIA

‘I HOPE you are not going to make a fool of yourself this time, Delia?’ remarked Mrs Johnson, gloomily, out of the depths of a low basket-chair in the far corner of the room.

‘Instead of calling me a fool, you ought rather to congratulate me on my cleverness, Cousin Anna. Have I not landed the one and only eligible marriageable man on your visiting list?’

Delia Goddard was kneeling before an enormous trunk, into which she was engaged in indiscriminately stuffing her entire wardrobe. The floor was strewn with her possessions—boots, gloves, ball dresses, hats, underlinen lay scattered about her all over the carpet; her methods of packing were crudely simple. She merely caught at the object nearest to hand, and rammed it down vehemently into the cavity before her. Nothing was folded, and no care was taken to prevent crushing and spoiling

A Girl from Australia

the different articles. Probably, when the box was full, Miss Goddard would get into it herself and stamp upon its contents. Her system of packing is mentioned, because it formed a kind of commentary upon her character.

‘You “landed,” as you call it, that unfortunate young Salway a short time ago, if you remember,’ remarked Mrs Johnson, drily.

‘Poor Salway! I did get so sick of him!’ murmured Delia stuffing a pair of thick walking boots violently into the folds of a white satin ball dress.

‘Who is going to say that you won’t get sick of Mr Doyne?’

‘Who, indeed!’ echoed Delia, with candid impersonality.

‘How many times, I should like to know, have you been engaged to be married?’ inquired Mrs Johnson, severely, after a short pause.

Delia laughed, and sat back upon her heels. She was a very pretty girl, certainly. Her blue eyes, her pink-and-white skin, her soft fluffy yellow hair, that was of the colour and texture of spun silk, all imparted a certain brilliancy to a beauty that, having nothing subtle or interesting about it, possessed at least the charm of absolute freshness.

When Delia laughed, she showed two rows

A Passing Fancy

of even white teeth between the parted scarlet of her charming lips, and she looked prettier than ever.

She held up her hands; they were scarcely in keeping with her face, the fingers being short and stumpy and the palms a thought too broad for symmetry; her hands, and her feet too, for the matter of that, were a little common in make.

‘Once, twice, thrice—and now this makes the fourth time!’ she replied gaily, docking the numbers off on her left fingers with her right forefinger. ‘The first time was at Wanlogo to a new chum—he hardly counts—it was just for fun, you know—he really never believed in it himself—it was soon over. The second was the third mate on the ship coming over. Well, there was really nothing else to do on that voyage, you know!—and he wasn’t bad-looking; but he said he had no prospects and would be always at sea—so what could I do but break it off before we got into harbour? Then, as you know, came Salway—but he was *such* a boy! and so fearfully in love—it made him so dull, poor thing. And number four is Bernard Doyne. I don’t call it so very many, considering,’ added Miss Goddard, reflectively.

A little silence, during which Delia dashed

A Girl from Australia

a lace-trimmed silk blouse, a garden hat and a handful of collars into the vacuum beneath her, and steadied them well down with a heavy writing-desk, some boot-trees and a sponge-bag.

‘I wonder if you have ever been in love, Delia?’ mused Mrs Johnson, meditatively. She was a dark-eyed, pale-faced lady, who might once have been beautiful, but she had never been strong, and at thirty-eight she was a chronic invalid and was for ever seeking for health at foreign watering-places. She was ordered abroad now to drink German waters, and also to escape the fatigues of the London season. She was gentle in disposition, constant in her affections, and somewhat melancholy and sentimental in her views of life. She had been devotedly attached to Delia’s mother—a cousin from whom she had been parted at the age of seventeen—and for the mother’s sake had welcomed Delia warmly, almost indeed with a rapture of affection; but Delia, though she was always pleasant and sweet-tempered, was not a very satisfactory person to love. Mrs Johnson did not understand her. Although Delia had now been three months an inmate of her house, she did not seem to know her any better than she had done at first. She had got no nearer, apparently, to the real heart

A Passing Fancy

and mind of her pretty god-daughter. The question perhaps was, Was there any heart or mind to get at? All these lovers with whom she had played at being engaged—had she cared about any one of them?—did she care about Mr Doyne, to whom she had been now engaged a week? Mrs Johnson believed Bernard Doyne to be a good match, and as she was aware that Delia's parents, who were burdened with a large family, would be pleased if their daughter married well in England, she had considered it no more than her duty to encourage the young man's attentions. But what if Delia did not love him? Anna Johnson, who was a fervent believer in love matches, and who had married her own husband because she had been head over ears in love with him, shrank with horror from the thought that Delia might have accepted Bernard Doyne without being perfectly certain of her own feelings for him. It was with a real anxiety that she pressed the question home.

'Have you ever been in love, Delia? Are you in love now with Mr Doyne?' she repeated earnestly.

Delia shrugged her shoulders, and after a moment's reflection she answered, 'I want to marry him—I think.'

A Girl from Australia

‘Why? Because you love him, dear?’

‘Do I? Perhaps—Oh, yes. Don’t look shocked, Cousin Anna. I am quite sure I like him, and it’s so exciting going down by myself to stay with his mother—it’s exactly like a novel—I wonder what the old lady will be like? Will she have snow-white hair and wear priceless lace? And will she clasp me to her heart at the front door and call me her darling child? I can hear her say, “For my Bernard’s sake, I love you already, dearest Delia,” and I think I shall reply, “Love me for myself, dear madam.” Do old ladies in England like being called “madam”? Then I shall sink on one knee—all on the door mat, you know—and press my lips to her thin white hands. It really will be a very pretty scene, I think!’

Mrs Johnson laughed a little, but not very heartily—and she shook her head.

‘You take all this far too lightly, Delia. Can you never be serious? never look at life in earnest? My dear child, marriage is the most solemn and important event of a woman’s whole life, and if you mean to marry Bernard Doyne—’

‘Why, certainly I mean to,’ broke in Delia, brightly. ‘I always *mean* to marry them, but

A Passing Fancy

of course one can never tell how one may feel later on.'

'If you can say that, you cannot be in love; and marriage without love is a terrible thing!'

Delia stifled a yawn.

Mrs Johnson leant forward and took the girl's hand in her own.

'Let me implore you not to marry any man you do not really love,' she said earnestly; 'you can have no idea how miserable a loveless marriage can be. And if you have only accepted Mr Doyme because he is well off—or we think he is—'

'Oh, no, my dear Anna,' broke in Delia; 'with all my faults, I am not so mercenary as all that!'

'Then why—why—?'

'Why have I accepted him? Oh, because he asked me, in the first place, and then he is really very handsome—don't you think so?—and he waltzes divinely, and he has got a house in the country of his own—or will have when his mother dies—and I love the country in England. Besides, we shall live in London half the year, he says, so that will make a constant change. I do so *hate* monotony.'

'But all these are no reasons at all, Delia!'

A Girl from Australia

cried her friend, in genuine distress. 'It's the man himself. What do you know of him? of his character and disposition? of his temper? of his capabilities for making a good husband?'

Delia Goddard jumped up from her lowly attitude and laughed.

'Oh, wise and prudent Cousin Anna,' she cried gaily, 'why should I bother myself with so many tiresome considerations now? If I marry Bernard I shall know all about his character and temper—much *too* much indeed, in no time! And if I don't marry him, why then, why should I trouble my head about such stupid things? Just now he amuses me, and the circumstances amuse me, and it's nice to be engaged and to have nice presents and—why, *this* is the sort of thing I like!' she exclaimed as at that moment the housemaid appeared at the door bearing a huge bouquet of hothouse flowers on a tray, and beside the flowers was a box of French chocolates.

'With Mr Doyne's compliments, miss,' said the beaming damsel, and Delia skipped round the room waving her flowers triumphantly above her head.

'Aren't they lovely?' she cried gleefully. 'Now that is what I like! I told him I liked

A Passing Fancy

flowers and sweets, and he sends them round at once! Oh, of course I love Bernard! Who wouldn't love a man who does nice things like this?' and she fell to work on the chocolate creams. 'I love chocolates,' she mumbled, with her mouth full, 'and Bernard's a dear! Don't preach any more, Cousin Anna. Have one?' and she held out the box.

There was no doing anything with a creature so light as this. Mrs Johnson sighed profoundly. She felt her own responsibility terribly with regard to this marriage; for was it not all settled and arranged in her house, and would she not be partly to blame if it turned out badly? What would her Cousin Molly, who was at the other side of the world, say to her if her child married unhappily? Might she not reproach her for allowing Delia to throw herself away?

Poor Mrs Johnson tormented herself nearly into a fever over these vexed questions; but what was one to do with such a girl as Delia, who could never be serious for a single moment?

'I doubt if she has any heart at all,' she said to her husband that evening.

'So much the better,' replied her Ernest, who was a bit of a cynic in his way. 'The

A Girl from Australia

women who have no hearts are those who get on best in the world!’

‘Oh, Ernest, how *can* you say such dreadful things? And then there’s the poor young man! Suppose she were to throw him over for a mere caprice?’

‘Then he would be well rid of her. By the way, what do you know of this young fellow, Anna? What sort of man is he?’

‘I hardly know. We met him at the Russells, you know, and he seemed so very much struck with Delia that I asked him to call. He has been here a good deal since, and he certainly seems very devoted to her.’

Mr Johnson shook his head. ‘That tells one nothing—a young fellow in love is naturally seen at his best. What are his prospects?’

‘Oh, very good, I fancy. I asked him a question or two about that after he proposed to Delia. He tells me he is heir to a country place and that his mother is a widow; indeed, I rather fancy, from what he implied, that the estate is his own already and that he gives his mother an allowance and permits her to remain in his house, and that he is only reading for the Bar in order to have some occupation in town so as not to turn her out of her home.’

A Passing Fancy

‘All that sounds well. A good son makes a good husband as a rule,’ replied Mr Johnson.

And neither of these two worthy people had the remotest suspicion that Bernard’s plausible rendering of the circumstances was not absolutely reliable. If they had known him better, they would have understood that to make out a good story for himself upon the very shadowiest foundations of truth was one of Bernard Doyne’s little social talents.

But Mrs Johnson’s anxiety was all on Delia’s account — Delia, to whom, for her mother’s sake, she owed a duty.

Was Delia good enough or steady enough to be worthy of this excellent young man who had fallen so much in love with her, and who was so good a son to his widowed mother?

As a matter of fact, the young man was scarcely worthy of much sympathy upon any point; for if Bernard was by no means the ‘good son’ she imagined him to be, neither was his affection for Delia based upon very exalted motives. His passion for her was genuine enough as far as it went—it had, in fact, been real enough to interfere with his night’s rest and with his appetite, but what he had hankered after was only the pretty pink-and-white skin, the eyes of turquoise blue, the

A Girl from Australia

lips of gleaming red. About the real Delia within he knew nothing.

Who did?

Not her father or her mother in Australia. Not Mrs Johnson who had been as a mother to her since her arrival in England. Not the lovers who had held her slim figure to their tumultuously beating hearts, not—least of all—herself!

Capricious, changeable, inconstant—there was nothing tangible about her. What she did one day for no reasonable motive, she undid the next from causes that were seemingly quite as incomprehensible. To forecast her moods was vain—to reckon upon her, impossible. She was as light and inconsequent as the thistle-down that is blown hither and thither by every puff of air. And it is perhaps the women of this type who are responsible for three-fourths of the mischief that is done in the world.

Delia Goddard's heart was as empty as her head; she had no deep-seated affections nor had she any fixed purpose in life. And perhaps the only steadfast feeling that she possessed was a dogged determination never to go back to Wanlogo, her father's house in Australia. As much as it was in

A Passing Fancy

her to hate anything, Delia hated Wanlogo. Wanlogo was a picturesque house miles away from any other civilised habitation, it was deep set in a lovely, tangled garden in the midst of a wilderness of beautiful mountains and forests ; but the monotony of its peaceful beauty had been utterly loathsome to Delia. She had no eye for scenery, and she hated the simple country life and the large family party, and the busy life and necessary economy that was the law of the house. Her soul had rebelled and chafed miserably against the household darning and sewing, against the feeding of the poultry and the making of the butter, which was what she had been brought up to do under her hard-working mother's eye ; and when there came one day a letter from the English cousin far away to ask if Mrs Goddard would not spare one of her girls to come over and spend a London season with her, there was never any doubt in anybody's mind that Delia was the one to go. Delia could be better spared than Constance, the second girl, who was a very demure and hard-working damsel. Constance put the little ones to bed and taught them their daily lessons, and looked after the servants. She was her mother's right hand generally. Nobody at Wanlogo could have spared Constance. But

A Girl from Australia

Delia—Delia was different ! Besides, she was the beauty, and it seemed only right and fair that she should have her chance and see the world.

‘And if your Cousin Anna can find her a husband at home,’ said Mr Goddard, in confidence to his wife, ‘why, so much the better. Delia will never make a good settler’s wife, she is too restless and discontented. She is pretty, and some good fellow in England, who can afford to keep an idle wife, may very likely take a fancy to her face. Let the child go, Molly, I’ll find the passage money somehow.’

So it was to be Delia. She herself was wild with delight and excitement, and not a tear dimmed her pretty eyes as she bade her mother and brothers and sisters good-bye, although Mrs Goddard was speechless with grief, and all the younger children wept and wailed in chorus. Her father took her down to Sydney and saw her on board the ship, and put her under the charge of the captain, who was an old acquaintance. And then he kissed and blessed his daughter and bade her be good and happy. And he stood at the end of the harbour pier, poor man, and watched the ship as long as she was in sight, with misty eyes and a full heart, and prayed fervently to himself that he might live to see his little girl again.

A Passing Fancy

But Delia had no tears for him, and as she stood leaning over the ship's bulwarks, watching the swiftly receding land she was born in fade away into the dim distance of the horizon, all that she said to herself was,—

‘I’m off at last! how jolly! I do hope I may never set eyes on that horrid country any more!’

CHAPTER IV

THE ARRIVAL OF DELIA

WHEN, after a three hours' journey on one of the ideal warm afternoons of the first outburst of an English summer, Delia Goddard, rather hot and dusty, alighted at the quiet little station of Anderley, she at once looked about her for the powdered-haired and gigantic footman touching the rim of his gold-laced hat, that a long perusal of magazine fiction had taught her to regard as likely to be her first initiator into the novelties of a visit to an English country house. The young ladies in these serial tales had, she remembered, almost always been met at the station by a magnificent powdered man-servant. She failed, however, to see any trace of him, but a few moments later, whilst she was standing somewhat disconsolately on the platform in front of a mountain of her own luggage, the train having slowly resumed its onward way, she

A Passing Fancy

was confronted by a tall lady in a sailor hat and irreproachably neat serge dress, with a slender girlish figure and a remarkably charming face and smile, who inquired her name.

‘You are Miss Goddard? Yes, I am sure you are!’

‘Yes, that is my name,’ she replied, slightly puzzled.

‘That’s all right. Come along, then. Never mind your luggage; Trotter will bring that on in the cart.’

She led the way out of the station, and Delia followed. Outside stood two vehicles—a phaeton with a pair of handsome bay horses, and a pony cart in which was seated an old man in livery.

‘The porters will bring the luggage, Trotter,’ called out the lady to the old man. ‘Now get in, my dear, and I will drive you home.’

Delia obeyed in silence, and it was only after the bays had turned out of the station yard and were spinning gaily along the high road that she found courage to say to her charioteer,—

‘I wish—I quite knew who you are. You are taking me to Mrs Doyne’s, I suppose?’

Her companion broke into a merry laugh,

The Arrival of Delia

and turned a bright face of amusement upon the pretty girl at her side.

‘Oh, fancy your not guessing! I ought to have introduced myself! I *am* Mrs Doyne.’

‘You—*you*!—you are surely not Bernard’s mother?’ exclaimed Delia, in a voice almost of consternation.

‘Well, yes, I have the’—Ambrosia paused and nearly used the word ‘misfortune’ but quickly substituted a more decorous one—‘the honour of being Bernard’s mother! You look very much surprised.’

‘I—never expected—that is, I imagined you would be quite different,’ stammered the girl.

‘What! did Bernard tell you I was in my dotage, then?’

‘Oh, no! at least it was my fault, I did not understand.’ As a matter of fact, Bernard had spoken of his mother to her as ‘the old lady,’ and once, even less respectfully, as ‘the old woman.’ Delia was not quite stupid enough to mention this, although her line of argument was clear to Mrs Doyne when she remarked,—

‘My mother looks quite old, you know; but though I suppose you are as old as she is, you seem to be a young woman!’

A Passing Fancy

The remark was a little personal, but Mrs Doyne was not offended.

‘Ah, well, my dear, I am not really young at all, you know,’ she replied, ‘but my life has been for many years so happy, and so full of peace’—she paused a moment and breathed a sigh of content—then resumed quickly; ‘but I don’t want to talk about myself, Delia—I may call you Delia, may I not? I want to be friends with you, my dear, and I want to discuss this idea of your marrying Bernard quietly with you. I don’t want you to be in too great a hurry; you are both very young, and marriage is a serious matter and not to be undertaken lightly.’

‘Why, that is what Mrs Johnson was perpetually saying. She was always telling me to “think about it.”’

‘Well, she was quite right, a little thinking over things is always wise,’ rejoined her companion, kindly.

‘I never think,’ said Delia, with decision.

Ambrosia turned quickly and looked at her curiously.

‘All the thinking in the world won’t alter things, you know,’ went on Delia, sententiously. ‘And Bernard and I see no occasion to wait,’ and she tossed her nose a little in the air. ‘We

The Arrival of Delia

have already settled to be married in August. It is not at all too soon, I consider,' she added grandly.

For a few moments there was silence, and the merry ring of the horses' hoofs along the hard white road kept time to the beating of the two women's hearts.

Delia was telling herself tumultuously that she was not going to be dictated to as if she were a child, and that Bernard's mother had no right to interfere in her concerns.

And Mrs Doyne, with that angry sense of antagonism which Bernard himself had always the misfortune to arouse in her, was fighting bravely with a rapid conviction of dislike and repulsion towards the girl who was to be his wife.

'She is but a child,' she said to herself, 'a silly child, too, to try and run against me at the outset, but I suppose Bernard has drilled her into taking up an attitude of opposition to me; it is very natural if she is in love with him.'

Ambrosia was always just and fair. When she spoke again it was quite kindly and gently.

'Ah, well, we will talk over all this later on when Bernard comes. There are all sorts of prosaic matters, which, of course, you cannot understand, and that will be better discussed

A Passing Fancy

with him than with you. Here we are at Meadowlands. How do you like the look of it, Delia?’

Delia said it was pretty without very much enthusiasm. At heart she was disappointed. She had expected finer grounds, a larger and more imposing house. She was also aware of the fact that she had been snubbed by her future mother-in-law, and Delia was quite unused to being snubbed, and did not like it a bit. Her beauty and youth had given her a highly coloured and entirely fictitious conception of her own value in the world. To be spoilt and petted, and admired, was what came easily to her, and, above all, she must be first, always and everywhere.

Her opening experiences at Meadowlands were destined to shake her rudely from these agreeable and comfortable convictions.

‘Who is that?’ she inquired sharply, and with her usual lack of reticence, as the phaeton drew up at the front door. A gentleman was standing just inside the porch; he was not very tall, not nearly so tall as the heroes of Delia’s magazine stories, but he had dark eyes and a certain air of distinction. Anything new in the way of a man always created an excitement in Delia’s volatile mind. Would he admire her?

The Arrival of Delia

would he add himself to the number of her victims?

‘I suppose you have a house full of guests, Mrs Doyne? Is this one of them?’ she asked quickly, saying to herself at the same time that if there were men in the house she should manage to amuse herself very well till Bernard arrived. But Mrs Doyne dashed these hopes speedily to the ground by her reply.

‘No, I have no guests; you and I will be quite by ourselves till Bernard comes. The gentleman you see is only my neighbour, Mr Hatton; he has come over to look at the bays,’ she explained.

The explanation was scarcely necessary, for Lorry had fallen promptly upon the horses, and was already stooping down to feel their legs. The bays were new, and he had been mainly instrumental in their purchase.

‘How did they go?’ he inquired eagerly. ‘Did they pull?’

‘Not an ounce.’

‘Object to the train?’

‘Not a scrap. I am delighted with them. They are very free goers, and their mouths are quite light; I have driven them with two fingers. Lorry, leave off looking at the bays

A Passing Fancy

and come and be introduced to Miss Goddard, and help her down, please.'

Lorry bowed to the young lady, and came forward obediently to assist her from the carriage, but he hardly looked at her as he did so, although he went so far as to express a polite hope that she was not tired with her journey ; and, as Delia said indignantly to herself, never even waited for her answer !

There was tea waiting for them in the drawing-room, and here this unaccountable indifference to her attractions again aroused Delia's annoyance. Mr Hatton handed her her teacup and the sugar and the muffins, all without so much as a single steady look at her face ; it seemed as though she was of no more interest to him than the Persian cat and the fox terrier that lay together in amity on the hearthrug ; in fact, these two creatures got more notice from him than she did, for puss received her saucer of milk from his hands, and Viper sat up on his hind legs in front of him and was fed with scraps of sweet biscuit, whilst to Delia not one single interested glance was vouchsafed. She could not understand it. A man, and he did not look at her ! And yet she knew that she was pretty enough to be very well worth looking at.

The Arrival of Delia

If his eyes strayed toward her casually they passed her over, and she felt convinced that he scarcely saw her. He was still talking about the new horses.

They were a little raw at turning, Mrs Doyne had admitted. One of them seemed slightly less perfectly broken than the other. 'I think I shall get on his back to-morrow and try him over the hurdles in the meadow.'

'I beg you will do nothing of the kind,' he cried. 'I don't believe either of them have ever carried a lady.'

'*All* horses carry a lady, that have been ridden at all,' she answered.

'That is one of the fallacies that people are constantly stating as facts,' objected Mr Hatton. 'Let Trotter at anyrate take him out with a horse cloth first, or I will come over myself, if you like.'

'One would think they were wild beasts,' laughed Ambrosia. 'Miss Goddard was not at all alarmed on the way home—were you, Delia?'

'You did not tell her probably that you had never driven them before?'

'They went like sheep; didn't they, Delia?'

Delia knew nothing about thoroughbred horses, though she probably had heard a good

A Passing Fancy

deal about sheep. She answered carelessly that she had not noticed the horses.

Later on, when Miss Goddard had gone upstairs to her room and the friends were alone, they went out into the sunlit garden together, and as a matter of habit wandered down towards the river.

‘Well, what do you think of her?’ asked Ambrosia, a little eagerly.

‘I—well, I really scarcely looked at her.’

‘Oh, you insensible creature! Do you mean to tell me that you did not see how very pretty she is?’

‘Oh, yes, I saw that, of course; but, my dear Ambrosia, what have I to do with pretty girls?’ he added, turning towards her with one of those rare and charming smiles that always somehow set her pulses dancing.

How stupid women are—even those who are reckoned the cleverest amongst them! For ever they are running their heads against a stone wall, for ever requiring at the hands of man that comprehension of hidden motives which is a masculine impossibility. At that moment, a moment of rare opportunity, Ambrosia wanted to be contradicted flatly, roundly and angrily. For that purpose she made the following effete and short-sighted remark,—

The Arrival of Delia

‘They ought, on the contrary, to be exceedingly interesting to you, Lorry; it would be a most natural and rational thing; in fact, I can scarcely understand your apparent obtuseness on the subject.’

He set his teeth hard and looked away from her across the meadows.

‘You are recommending me, I suppose, to take an interest in pretty girls? It would, I gather, be gratifying to yourself if I were to do so?’

‘How blind he is,’ she thought. Aloud she laughed; and had he had the wit to perceive it, the laugh was full of mockery.

‘Why, ~~my~~ dear Lorry, a young girl is undoubtedly better suited to you than an old woman!’ she replied, with a gaiety that anybody but a man in love must have seen to be forced, and, of course, again she longed to be contradicted. Instead of which his face grew dark and blank, and he answered her nothing.

As a matter of fact, he was hurt and wounded beyond description.

‘She will never love me,’ he said to himself; ‘she is cold as ice and hard as iron.’

All the faithful love of a lifetime was seemingly thrown away upon her! There were a

A Passing Fancy

few moments of horrible, stormy silence before he spoke—with bitter sarcasm this time.

‘And this young lady whom you are advising me to notice—she is Bernard’s *fiancée*, is she not? Your son’s promised wife?’

‘Oh, she is only a type, of course! A pretty girl like the rest. There are dozens of them about, you know.’

‘Dozens! You are quite right. I will think your advice over, Ambrosia. Good-bye. I must be going.’

She watched him go in silence, and then was angry with herself that she was too proud to call him back.

He had said no word more about the horse that he had forbidden her to ride; he seemed to have forgotten all about that. He just went away silently and miserably, with a bent head and drooping shoulders.

‘How foolish he is!’ she thought as she watched him—a little doubtfully, perhaps, but with no real misgiving in her mind. ‘As if I meant it—or as if *he* meant it! Why does he never say the right thing at the right moment?’

Yet how was the poor man to guess what she wanted him to say!

‘I can make him miserable still, anyhow,’

The Arrival of Delia

she told herself, not without secret satisfaction. It was the old story. The love of power is the rock upon which hundreds of women make shipwreck of their lives.

Upon that rock these two women of my story, the clever one as well as the foolish one, the woman of true heart and of strong, deep feeling, equally with the vain and empty-hearted girl, were both destined to shatter their lives.

CHAPTER V

AN UNLUCKY ACCIDENT

THE immediate result of the somewhat stormy parting between the two old friends was a catastrophe. A small catastrophe, it is true, but one that was destined to have far-reaching consequences.

Ambrosia was by custom and by inclination an early riser. She used to say of herself that she went to bed with the swallows and got up with the larks. She was often up and about before the housemaids were down, and whilst the darkened house was still shuttered and barred against the rays of the morning sun.

She awoke herself always. A bathroom opened out of her bedroom. She was independent of the ministrations of a lady's maid. She never exacted early rising from anybody else under her roof, but she preferred it herself. She used to say laughingly that it was

An Unlucky Accident

the secret 'of the gods'—the secret, that is, of eternal youth.

On this particular morning she rose as usual before the rest of her household were astir, and because there was the obstinacy of a wilful woman in her heart and a stupid irritation against her best friend, she dressed herself in her habit. Then she let herself out of the house by the garden door and went round to the stables. Trotter, the venerable coachman who had lived with her parents and had taught her to ride when she was six years old, was up and about too; but even if he had not been there, Ambrosia was quite equal to putting the saddle and bridle on a horse for herself.

The old man prepared to obey her orders, but very unwillingly.

'I wouldn't, Miss Brosie, not if I was you,' he grumbled as he led the least amenable of the new bays out into the yard. 'I would just do as Mister Hatton says, and wait till he comes down after his breakfast. We'll soon clap a rug on the 'oss and see how he goes then.'

But Ambrosia would not listen to these words of prudence. He ought to know, she told Trotter gaily, that she had never been

A Passing Fancy

afraid of any horse in her life, and she certainly didn't mean to begin in her old age.

'Ah, you was always a wilful lass, Miss Brosie,' replied the old man, with an indulgent smile, as he tightened the girths of the saddle. To Trotter, who had lifted her up in his arms on to her first Shetland pony, his mistress was 'Miss Brosie' still; he had never been able to realise her matronhood, and she never reproved him for his error. 'Brosie' had been the name of her youth. Nobody but Trotter called her Brosie now. She let it pass. And in her heart of hearts she loved him for sticking to that dear forgotten name.

She sprang lightly into the saddle, gathered up her reins and trotted out by the gate into the long meadow to the right of the stables.

She gave the bay his head and he broke into a gallop. The sunshine and the morning air got, no doubt, into his blood, for he was fresh and pranced about in a very exuberance of delight. When she had galloped all round the field, Ambrosia pulled him up, when straightway he entered upon a bucking and kicking match with her that might have unseated a less experienced rider. But Ambrosia had a magnificent seat, and thoroughly enjoyed the contest, which ended

An Unlucky Accident

after a few minutes in the entire subjugation of her animal. She walked him once all round the field as quietly as a lamb.

Then she made a sign to Trotter, who was watching her proudly from the gate, and a stable-helper having now appeared upon the scene, the two proceeded to set up some hurdles in the middle of the meadow.

'She'll go over them like a bird, you'll see,' said Trotter to his underling. 'Ah, it ain't for nothing as I taught her to ride when she was a bit of a girl—bless her pretty heart!'

The hurdles being in place, Mrs Doyne, who had retreated to the furthest end of the meadow, now turned the bay's head straight for them, stuck her heel into his side and cantered forward.

She thought she was going to have no trouble at all. 'I shall ride him to hounds next winter,' she said to herself as she neared the hurdles.

Perhaps it was only the swaying skirt of her habit fluttering out upon the wind that frightened the bay, or it might have been a bird that rose with a shrill note from the grass at his feet—for a horse is the biggest fool of any animal alive, and a

A Passing Fancy

tomtit or a week-old kitten is capable of scaring every bit of sense out of his head—anyway the bay refused when he was within but a yard of the hurdle. He swerved violently, and bolted in terror towards a little stream, on the farther side of a low fence, that was fringed with osier beds. Ambrosia made a valiant effort to turn him ere he reached this obstruction, but the animal was really mad by now, and would not yield to her hand—the consequence was that he caught his knees on the top rail of the fence and came over on to his head into the withies on the other side of it. And Mrs Doyne was pitched over too. It was decidedly a nasty fall, which might however have proved more serious had she not had the readiness to throw herself clear of the falling horse. As it was, she fell on her head and twisted her ankle badly.

Trotter and the stable boy picked her up unconscious, and carried her back to the house on one of the hurdles.

Delia Goddard, waking before the maid had come into her room to draw up the blinds, was immediately aware of some unusual commotion going on in the house. There were voices and footsteps outside her door

An Unlucky Accident

and along the passage, and presently the sound of carriage wheels driving quickly up to the house.

Her windows overlooked the front door, and Delia sprang out of bed and peeped out from behind the shelter of her blind. An elderly gentleman in a tall hat and frock coat was just alighting from a dog-cart.

She was still standing at the window in her nightgown when the housemaid came in.

‘Has anything happened?’ she inquired quickly.

‘Oh, dear me, miss, yes, indeed, I’m sorry to say; it’s the doctor as has just arrived, and Mrs Doyne has never spoke nor moved since the coachman brought her into the house.’

The housemaid was in tears.

‘Good heavens! is she dead?’

‘Oh, how can I tell, miss? I heard Trotter say it might be her death!’ whimpered the girl.

‘What was she doing out of doors?’

‘Riding, miss.’

‘At this hour—*riding*?’

‘Oh, the missus often goes on horseback early in the mornin’, or sometimes it’s on her bike, or out on the water. But she’s never met with a haccident before—’

A Passing Fancy

‘An accident? What happened?’

‘I’m sure I can’t say, miss, but Trotter he said it was along of one of them dratted new ‘osses.’

Delia remembered that Mr Hatton had begged Mrs Doyne not to mount the new horse until he had tried it with a rug.

She dressed herself leisurely, and with a strong feeling of disgust at her own position.

An accident! an illness! doctors in the house! just as she herself had come to stay in it! What dreadful bad luck, and what a dull visit she was in for! Of course, indeed, if Mrs Doyne was killed—well, Delia hoped she wasn’t heartless, but really it would simplify matters very much for Bernard and herself if such were to turn out to be the melancholy case! And she didn’t really suppose she would be expected to go into mourning for a mother-in-law who died before she ever became one, and whom she hardly knew! Her new summer frocks were so very pretty, that it would be dreadful if they were to be all wasted!

Delia was twisting up her pretty frizzy yellow locks before the glass, whilst she thought over what she had better do in case Mrs Doyne was dead. Leave the house, of

An Unlucky Accident

course, as quickly as possible, she told herself. Then where should she go? She might go back to the empty house in Eccleston Square for a night or two—the tenants had put off their arrival for a few days, and she could send a telegram to Anna Johnson from London, and join them at Homburg—it might be amusing out there—then she could come back with them, and be married in August all the same, for, of course, Meadowlands was Bernard's, and there would be no tiresome mother to put difficulties in his way, and to persuade him to postpone his marriage.

But was it possible that he would want her to be present at the funeral? Oh, no, she really couldn't and wouldn't do that! She had never been to a funeral in her life; it would frighten her to death; besides, it would mean a black dress and crape. Crape gave her the cold shivers down her back, even to think about. She must certainly stand out against the funeral. Bernard couldn't be so brutal as to want her to go to it!

It was all very shocking and very silly, no doubt, but it must be remembered that although Delia's imagination had run ahead in a horribly practical fashion, she had had no time to feel

A Passing Fancy

affection for the hostess whom she was consigning so airily to her grave, and she could not be expected, perhaps, to experience much sorrow in these entirely imaginary circumstances. It was the embarrassment and confusion with regard to her own plans and arrangements which chiefly occupied her mind.

By the time she had finished dressing her hair, she had settled everything so conclusively and admirably that it was almost a disappointment to her when the maid thrust a beaming face, radiant with smiles, in at the door.

‘I thought you’d be glad to hear, miss, that the missus have come to all right, and the doctor says there’s nothing serious, and no bones broken, only her foot is hurt, and also she will have to keep very quiet in her room for perhaps two days, as her head aches and she is rather feverish, but he says she will be quite well again soon.’

Delia came down very late to her solitary breakfast. She felt lonely and disconsolate, and bitterly regretted all the past delights of London. She was afraid country house life in England was going to be a very dull experience, especially in a house with illness, where she was told not to play the piano or

An Unlucky Accident

ring bells, or make a noise running up and down stairs and passages.

The doctor had insisted on absolute quiet for his patient.

Delia felt herself dreadfully aggrieved. She sat down to write letters, but after beginning several, one to her mother, another to Mrs Johnson, and a third to Bernard, she found herself sitting staring idly into the garden, stranded for lack of 'something to say.' Letter-writing was not a strong point with Delia. Both as regards style and autography, her letters would, in fact, have compared badly with those of a child of twelve years old. The short, bald sentences conveyed no information worth recording, and she was entirely ignorant of the pleasant art of weaving a conversational treatise out of slender materials. She began all three letters with the same sentence—her one piece of news.

'Mrs Doyme has tumbled off her horse this morning. She is in bed. The doctor has been, and is coming again. It is very dull and sad for me.'

This unsportsmanlike rendering of events was really all she had to say, and eventually, after sitting idly biting the top of her penholder for half an hour, she thrust back the unfinished

A Passing Fancy

letters into her writing-case, and wandered out aimlessly into the garden.

It was certainly some amusement to her to watch, from the shelter of the shrubbery walk, the number of people who came in at the gates to inquire at the front door for Mrs Doyne. The news of her accident must have spread like wildfire, for during the course of the morning some twenty or thirty persons, some on foot and some on wheels, came up the drive to make inquiries for the popular hostess of Meadowlands. But not one of them asked to see Miss Goddard, although she would very gladly have diverted the dulness of the day by receiving some of them.

One lady, the clergyman's wife, who came with her two daughters, did indeed leave a message for her, which the butler duly delivered.

'Mrs Storey told me to say, miss, that she would have liked you to come round to lunch at the Vicarage, but she felt sure you would be too anxious about Mrs Doyne to care to leave the house.'

Delia could have cried with vexation. She wasn't in the least anxious, and even a vicarage luncheon-table would have been more enlivening than the solitary meal at Meadowlands which she was at the moment discussing.

An Unlucky Accident

It was some time after that meal had been eaten that the remembrance of Laurence Hatton came into her thoughts. Why did he not come over to break the monotony of the afternoon? Had he been one of the morning callers? She went into the front hall and examined the cards that lay in a white heap upon the centre table. But Mr Hatton's was not amongst them, and yet Mrs Doyne had said that he was a near neighbour. She began by wondering why he had not come; she ended by wishing that he would come.

She liked the looks of him, she told herself; he had lovely dark eyes and an interesting face, and he had piqued her vanity horribly by not looking at her sufficiently. She thought she would like to *make* him look at her—and to look with appreciation. With Mrs Doyne safely upstairs in her bed, she might have a chance of achieving this, for how could any man with eyes in his head help seeing how pretty she—Delia Goddard—was. And surely, if he were to recognise this fact, he would also see that she was very much better worth looking at than a woman who, after all, must be old, to be Bernard's mother, in spite of her auburn hair and slender figure.

Presently she asked Sims, the butler, to tell

A Passing Fancy

her where Mr Hatton lived, and when the man pointed out the Grange to her from the windows, Delia was more interested than ever.

‘That lovely old house amongst the trees? Surely it is very old, is it not?’

‘Very old, miss; the oldest house and the oldest family in the county is the Hattons of Hatton Grange. I wonder Mr Hatton hasn’t been up yet to inquire after Mrs Doyne, he being a great friend.’

‘Do you think he can have heard of Mrs Doyne’s accident?’

‘It would be strange if he had not, miss; still I am surprised he has not called.’

This provided Delia with a decent excuse for carrying out a scheme already fomenting in her mind. She put on her hat, a very becoming one, armed herself with a rose-tinted sunshade, and was soon walking quickly along the road in the direction of the Grange.

An avenue of great elms led up from the gates to the house. Delia felt very small and shy walking up to the porch, which was massively carved and partly covered with a thick growth of ivy.

The bell clanged loudly and harshly, apparently just above her own head. After what seemed to her a long interval, the bolts of the

An Unlucky Accident

heavy oak door were noisily drawn back from inside and there appeared a very old woman with a much wrinkled face, like one of Rembrandt's portraits, snow-white hair, and gold-rimmed spectacles on her nose. She wore a black stuff dress, over the bodice of which a white muslin kerchief was plaited in an old-fashioned style; there was also a white muslin mot cap, much starched and frilled, upon her head.

'Is Mr Hatton at home?' demanded the girl's shrill young voice.

'No, madam, he is not,' replied the ancient dame, a little stiffly. A pretty young lady inquiring for her master was not the kind of visitor to which Mrs Makin was accustomed.

Delia, who had never before been addressed as 'Madam,' laughed a little. She looked very charming when she laughed, and the heart of the elderly housekeeper was a little mollified.

'A sweet, pretty young thing,' she thought, 'whoever she may be.'

'My name is Miss Goddard,' volunteered Delia. 'I am staying with Mrs Doyne.'

'Oh, indeed?' Mrs Makin opened the door just a shade wider. The young lady must certainly be a lady if she was staying at Meadowlands. Mrs Makin respected Mrs

A Passing Fancy

Doyne very much, she would have told you, although she had always been dead against her master bringing her to the Grange as his wife. Mr Laurence ought not to marry a widow older than himself; it was against all the traditions of the family that he should wish to do so. Therefore Mrs Makin had a respect for Mrs Doyne mainly because she refused to become her master's wife.

It would not be at all a suitable marriage for him. Now, a pretty young creature like this—'if so be that her family be good enough,' thought Mrs Makin—would be far better suited to be Mr Hatton's wife. She tried to remember whether Mrs Doyne possessed a niece or a cousin.

'Did Mrs Doyne send you with a message, miss?' she inquired. 'I am sorry my master is out; he went up to London by the early train this morning.'

'Oh, that accounts for it, then. We felt sure he could not have heard that Mrs Doyne met with a bad accident whilst out riding this morning.'

'Dear, dear! miss, I am very sorry.'

'She is going on very well, I am happy to say, but of course it will be a few days before she is about again.'

An Unlucky Accident

‘Dear, dear!’ repeated the old woman with concern. ‘Mr Hatton will be back by dinner-time; I will be sure to tell him. Do you think, miss, that Mrs Doyne would like him to call round after his dinner to see her? That is what you came to say, perhaps?’

‘Yes, I think that would be the best plan,’ replied Delia, with disingenuous frankness. She had had some thoughts of getting into the house and awaiting the return of its master, but the dragon who guarded the fortress gave no sign of allowing her to set foot inside, so on the whole Delia thought it wiser to beat a retreat.

‘At anyrate, I have secured myself against a solitary evening,’ she thought as she walked back to Meadowlands.

She went straight upstairs to her room, and spent some time turning out all her dresses on to the floor, and trying on first one and then another with a view to the selection of the most becoming evening toilette she possessed.

CHAPTER VI

'IDLE HANDS'

'BUT surely Mrs Doyne will see me if, as you say, she is in the boudoir, and is better?'

'Dr Green has only just gone, sir, and he assured me she was very much better, but she is quite confined to her room, although the doctor lifted her himself on to the sofa in the boudoir.'

Lorry stood just inside the hall. The fine day had ended in rain, and his cap and mackintosh coat were dripping. Sims began helping him off with the wet coat. Mr Hatton was rather pale, or perhaps it was only the uncertain light of the hanging lamp that seemed to have taken the colour out of his face.

'Mrs Doyne, I understand, sent me a message this afternoon to come round after dinner. I feel sure she intended to see me.'

He certainly looked anxious and miserable. They had parted in what had almost been anger, and she had gone flat against his en-

‘Idle Hands’

treaty with regard to the horse. She might have been killed; even as it was she was ill and in pain, and all his heart went out in longing to her; he must see her, if only to make his peace with her.

It was news to Sims that his mistress had sent up to the Grange, but he imagined one of the maids had been despatched with a note.

‘If she said she would see you, sir, I had better go upstairs and inquire,’ he remarked.

‘Let me go up and ask?’ said a voice at the other end of the hall. A door had opened softly, and a charming vision in diaphanous green draperies appeared upon the scene. ‘Is it Mr Hatton?’ asked Delia, peering out into the half-lit hall.

Lorry had started a little as he turned quickly round. If the truth be told, he had utterly forgotten Miss Goddard’s existence, for Mrs Makin, who was the very soul of conventional propriety, had not thought it discreet to mention that the message from Meadowlands had been brought by a pretty young lady. Good Mrs Makin imagined, in her innocence, that the young lady might not like it to be mentioned, so, whilst repeating the message, she had suppressed all mention of the messenger.

Yet now, in Lorry’s eyes, she was unspeak-

A Passing Fancy

ably welcome, for doubtless he could get at the details of the accident from her; she would surely know more about Ambrosia's present condition than the servants did.

He went across the hall and shook hands with her.

'I will run up and see, if you will wait in the drawing-room,' she said, and he went into the room gratefully, to await her return.

Lorry had in his own mind no doubt whatever as to Ambrosia's receiving him. Her boudoir opened out of her bedroom, once before he had sat there daily by the side of her sofa, when she had been laid up with some trifling indisposition. And to-day she must, he felt sure, long to see him as much as he longed to see her.

They had misunderstood each other yesterday, and had very nearly quarrelled—he and she who had never had a quarrel in their lives; it had given him a sleepless night, and had sent him up to London on purpose to purchase a little toy watch, which he knew she coveted, in order to make his peace. The little jewelled thing was ticking in his pocket now; he could feel it faintly throbbing against his heart, as he stood on the hearthrug waiting for Delia's return.

‘Idle Hands’

Upstairs, this was what was going on. The upper housemaid, Ann, who always waited on Mrs Doyne, was on guard in the bedroom. Mrs Doyne was in the boudoir beyond, lying on the sofa. The door between the two rooms was open.

‘I came to know how Mrs Doyne is?’ said Delia to the servant.

Ambrosia heard her voice, and called out to her,—

‘Is that you, Delia? Come in and see me.’ Delia went in.

Ambrosia lay propped up with pillows on the sofa; she was pale, and her foot was in bandages. Earlier in the day she had been feverish, but the fever had left her now, and she was only shaken and rather pulled down by it. She had a splendid constitution and always recovered quickly.

‘This is dreadfully dull for you, my dear child,’ she said kindly, holding out her hand. ‘But I shall soon be downstairs again, though this tiresome sprain will tie me to the sofa for some days, I am afraid. Have you written to Bernard?’

Delia replied that she had. She did not mention that the letter lay unfinished in her writing-case.

A Passing Fancy

‘I wonder if he could get down before Saturday? It would amuse you to have him here, I daresay. I am afraid you will be so lonely. But I shall send you over to the Vicarage to-morrow. The Storey girls will be delighted to have you. And there’s Mr Hatton too—though he is rather elderly, I daresay, you will think—still he would, I know, take you out in the boat if you like. By the way, did he call here this afternoon?’

‘No, Mrs Doyne.’ This reply being strictly true, caused Delia no scruples of conscience whatever.

Ambrosia was silent for a moment. ‘I would have seen him if he had,’ she murmured half to herself.

Ann appeared at the other door. ‘You was not to talk much, ma’am, the doctor said, if you will remember.’

‘Ann is a veritable martinet,’ said her mistress, smiling.

Delia jumped up. ‘I will go. I am only tiring you, I know. I only just wanted to see how you were.’

‘It was kind of you to come, Delia. Good-night.’

‘Good-night, Mrs Doyne. I hope you will sleep well, and be better to-morrow.’

‘Idle Hands’

She closed the boudoir door carefully behind her.

‘Mrs Doyne had much better not see anyone, I expect?’ she remarked to Ann. Ann was one of the old servants who had lived at Meadowlands before Ambrosia married. She was elderly and very grim, but she adored her mistress and would have died for her.

‘Much better not, miss,’ she replied emphatically. ‘I want her to have a good night’s rest, and am going to put her back to bed as soon as ever I can get her there.’

Delia slipped away downstairs quickly.

Lorry turned eagerly to the door as she came into the drawing-room.

‘Well, what did she say?’ he asked impatiently before she could speak.

‘Mrs Doyne is *so* sorry that she cannot see you, Mr Hatton.’

‘Oh!’ he said, and his face fell. ‘Is she not so well?’

‘Oh, yes, she is much better. But she is tired, I think, and wants to go back to bed.’

‘Oh!’ he said again, and looked down. He was bitterly disappointed, and a little resentful too. Why had she sent for him only to refuse to see him?

She might have seen him just for one

A Passing Fancy

minute, he thought ; just a smile and a squeeze of the hand would not surely have been too much for her, however tired she was !

‘ You told her I was here ? ’

‘ Oh, yes. ’ The lie, that was really a lie this time, slipped out quite easily.

He gave a short sigh and straightened himself.

‘ You are not going yet ? ’ she inquired wistfully.

‘ Well, yes, I suppose so. ’

‘ Oh, please stay a little and talk to me, I have been so very dull and lonely all day ; and Mrs Doyne said, if—if you came again to-morrow, I was to ask you if you would try and amuse me a little. ’

Lorry’s face softened and he smiled. ‘ You would like me to stay now ? ’

‘ Oh, *please* ; I have not had anybody to talk to all day. ’

He sat down near her and looked at her. Delia was sure that it was the very first time he had really done so.

‘ What am I to talk to you about ? ’ he asked pleasantly ; and then, because he really could think of nothing else to say, he added,—

‘ Shall I tell you what a very pretty frock you are wearing ? ’

‘Idle Hands’

‘Do you like it? Oh, I am so glad. I really don’t know why I put it on. I was feeling so sad when I dressed for dinner, that I just took up the first thing that was in the wardrobe.’

‘It is a very charming “first thing” then. What do you call the stuff? How soft and pretty it is.’

And he put forth a timid finger and touched the silky folds that lay on her knee.

‘It’s called *crêpe de chine*,’ she answered merrily. ‘Now are you any wiser?’

‘I will try and bear it in mind. You ought always to dress in pale green *crêpe de chine*, Miss Goddard; it is exceedingly becoming to you.’

Delia laughed brightly. ‘One couldn’t wear it in the daytime, you know,’ she cried, with the air of saying something clever.

This style of conversation suited her admirably. She was always quite able to hold her own with men who talked about her frocks and herself. Her dancing partners had generally discoursed on these topics, and even Bernard had never uttered any more erudite remarks, until he had digressed slightly in order to inform her of his overwhelming adoration. She believed that she

A Passing Fancy

'got on' with men capitally; the partners had always appeared to find her entertaining.

It seemed quite natural that Hatton should talk to her in this strain; what she was obviously quite unaware of, was that Hatton had never made such remarks to any woman in his life before. Trivial personal compliments about dress and looks had been hitherto as far removed from his ordinary conversation as the moon is from the earth. His many long talks with Ambrosia had been on widely different subjects.

As a matter of fact, he had not had the smallest notion of what to say to her, for to talk to Delia as he would have talked to Ambrosia would have been rank folly, of course.

Nevertheless, this little interchange of silly trivialities now went on for some twenty minutes or so between the two, and it would be untrue to say that Hatton was not amused by it. It was new to him to call up smiles and arch looks into the pretty face of a young girl, and there was a distinct charm in the novelty of the situation.

'You look like Undine,' he said to her, 'with your pale green draperies and your yellow hair. I shall call you Undine, I think.'

‘Idle Hands’

Delia had not the remotest idea who Undine was. She was not in the least well read or cultivated. She thought perhaps that Undine was the stage name of some well-known actress.

‘I hope Undine was pretty?’ she answered with audacious coquetry, looking up at him with a provocative smile.

‘*This* one is, at anyrate,’ he answered. She was young enough to be his daughter, he told himself as an excuse for his folly.

Nevertheless, a sort of secret disgust at himself and his foolishness came upon him suddenly. He got up and shook himself, as though to strike free from the nonsense of the last twenty minutes.

‘Well, I must be going,’ and he held out his hand. ‘When is Bernard coming?’ he added, for after all she was Bernard’s. What business had she to practise her wiles and smiles upon him?

‘Oh, bother Bernard!’ she cried, tossing her chin coquettishly.

‘Bother him by all means. But I suppose he is coming, isn’t he?’

‘Oh, I suppose so; not till Saturday, though. What on earth am I to do by myself all to-morrow?’

A Passing Fancy

‘Poor child! Shall I take pity on you and come and take you out? What can you do? Ride?’

‘No, I never learnt to ride.’

‘Bike, then?’

‘No.’

‘Row? punt? paddle?’

She shook her head. ‘I do nothing of that sort. Will you take me out for a drive?’

Hatton thought not. He did not particularly want to be seen about the country driving Delia in his phaeton. People might wonder and talk—and—well—Ambrosia might not like it.

‘I will bring the boat down in the morning and teach you to scull,’ he said, pressing the hand he somehow still held in his own.

Delia would have preferred to be driven. With the exception of dancing, she did not like any kind of bodily exertion. Physical exercise made one hot and red, she said, and ruined one’s complexion. But she had the wit to see that to get hold of him anyhow was the great thing, so she assented smilingly; and he went.

Outside, as he battled his way home through the wind and the rain, with his hands in his pockets and the collar of his coat turned up

‘Idle Hands’

to his ears, Laurence Hatton reviewed the incidents of the last half-hour critically and dispassionately.

‘What funny things girls are!’ he thought. ‘Here is a child just engaged to be married—in love presumably with the man she has accepted—and yet the little monkey is actually quite ready to flirt with *me*—a man nearly old enough to be her father—and a perfect stranger to her!’ and he laughed aloud a little at the recollection, which was not altogether unpleasing to him. ‘A pretty monkey, and rather fascinating!’ he mused; ‘but what the dickens did she mean by her looks and her smiles? or is there any meaning at all about her? Is it just that the poor child is so dull and desolate that it was a mere matter of seizing at any straw for the amusement of the moment? Bernard is a lucky fellow anyhow, and she is miles too good for him—but then any nice girl would be that. What did she mean by her “bother Bernard!” I wonder? I can’t make the child out; she puzzles me.’ He had reached his own door. Lorry had never walked along that familiar road before with his thoughts so full of a woman—who was not Ambrosia!

There had never indeed been a day or a

A Passing Fancy

night when, going from her door to his own, his mind had not been filled with the ruling passion of his life—the passion of his love for the woman who dominated his entire existence.

This recollection came back to him as he turned the latch key in the door. He went into the silent house. A lamp burnt low on a table in the vast oak-panelled hall. He took it up and passed into his own study beyond, which, with the dining-room, was the only sitting-room in use in these his bachelor days.

A small fire burnt on the hearth. Lorry had a passion for firelight, and it was only on the very hottest days of summer that a fire was not kindled in the evening in his study.

With a sigh of content he sank down into his own arm-chair, and straightway, even as he passed his hand across his forehead, the foolishness of the last hour seemed to be brushed away. The atmosphere of this familiar room dispelled the delusions by which Delia had bewildered his brain. The room was full of Ambrosia. Her photograph smiled at him from the table at his side; her portrait as a young girl, in oils—left to him by her mother's will—faced him on the wall. There were the

‘Idle Hands’

books that she had given him, and in which she had written his name; the foot of her favourite mare, mounted in silver, for an ink-stand; the pad of a fox they had hunted together made into a candlestick; a dozen little nick-nacks—Christmas and birthday presents from her—a pen, a paper-cutter, a bronze Mercury, a silver-mounted letter-case. These things all lay upon his writing-table. Over and over again she herself had sat in the chair opposite—her form seemed to fill it now.

He sank his head down into his hands. Why did she seem to be slipping away from him? Why had she refused to see him? What was this intangible something that seemed to have arisen between them? and wherefore did that mocking image of golden-haired youth come dancing in before his eyes even now—blotting out that other dearer and better dream of his manhood?

A mile away, at Meadowlands, Delia was pacing restlessly up and down her bedroom. Excitement had flushed her pink-and-white face into carmine, and the delight of triumph was thumping loudly at her heart.

‘I have made him look at me at anyrate!’ she said to herself exultingly. ‘I know that he admires me; I feel that he likes me; and

A Passing Fancy

he is fifty times more interesting than Bernard! Bernard is only a boy—but what a conquest this would be! something worth being vain about!’ She stopped short and pressed her hands hard against her head. ‘If only—I might trouble his dreams,’ she murmured, ‘and interfere with his sleep!’

She never knew it, but her wish was fulfilled. Lorry was haunted all night by the pretty, brainless face and the lovely pink-and-white skin. Twice he awoke out of an agonising dream—a dream in which Ambrosia was in some great trouble, and was calling to him to help her, and he could not get to her because of two soft, white, clinging arms, that were wound tight about his neck, and green diaphanous drapery that wrapped itself round his body and entangled him in its silken folds.

‘Undine,’ he murmured in his agony, ‘Undine! let me go! Undine! let me go!’

He awoke trembling and bathed in perspiration.

CHAPTER VII

DRIFTING APART

It is the little things after all that mainly determine the greater issues of life. The chances of time and of circumstance, the variations of wind and of weather, the hundred and one unforeseen trifles which nobody has reckoned upon or anticipated, that over and over again alter the whole events of existence. Life is like a river in full flood, one never knows exactly what course it will take or what it will do next.

It was of small use, for instance, that Lorry awoke the next morning, sane and in his right mind, and with a fixed determination to make a clean breast of it on the earliest opportunity to Ambrosia concerning his foolish philandering with Delia last night. He would tell her all about it, he thought, the very first time he should be alone with her.

Equally in vain was it that Ambrosia told

A Passing Fancy

herself that she would confess to Lorry that she had been wilful and obstinate in that matter of the new horse, and that it was all because she had been stupidly irritated against him that she had flown counter to him and disregarded his advice. 'As soon as ever he comes to see me I will tell him how sorry I am,' she said to herself directly she was awake.

The opportunity for this private talk which would have cleared away so much misunderstanding, never came at all to either of them!

Ambrosia was up and dressed on her sofa in good time. In herself she was, she declared, perfectly well—only her foot was still painful and useless.

'I will see everybody to-day, Ann; so you need not expect to shut me out from visitors any more! Especially will I see Mr Hatton. Tell Trotter to go over to the Grange at once and say I want to see Mr Hatton.' But by the time Lorry came over in glad response to this message, Mrs and Miss Storey were already in possession of the invalid's room. He had made up his mind to say to her first of all, 'Why would you not see me last night, Ambrosia, when I came round after dinner on purpose?' and then he would give her the little watch and make his confession to her as to

Drifting Apart

how—out of pique and disappointment—he had spent the half hour destined to herself.

But Mrs Storey sat stolidly on, telling Mrs Doyne ‘all the news’ as she put it—retailing the scandal and gossip of the whole parish, Mr Hatton called it—and after a brief handshake and a stereotyped inquiry, Lorry was driven into a desultory conversation with Miss Laura Storey. This young person babbled on effusively.

‘Isn’t it dreadful that dear Mrs Doyne should be laid up just now, with all the summer gaieties coming on? There is the County Cricket Match, you know, and the Anderley Flower Show—Mrs Doyne herself on the committee—and then Lady Aston’s garden-party on the 10th, to say nothing of the archery meeting and dance, which will simply collapse altogether, I believe, if Mrs Doyne cannot be there!’

‘I shall be well long before then, Laura!’ called out Ambrosia, gaily, from her sofa. Mrs Storey meanwhile plodded on regardless of interruption.

‘And as I was telling you, my dear, that horrid Mrs Gibbs got all the Aston Court washing this year—and poor Mrs Snivel, as respectable a woman as you will find in the whole parish, has just been done out of it by a

A Passing Fancy

wicked lie! I tell Mr Storey he ought to see her righted, but of course he won't interfere; just like a man! and the parsons are as bad as the rest I always say.'

'And we are all to wear white muslin with Lincoln green cross sashes, Mr Hatton,' went on Laura Storey. 'Mrs Doyne designed the dresses herself; and she promised to design something fresh for the Gymkana in June, and to arrange about the classes, so what we shall do if she is laid up I can't imagine!'

'But the new curate won't set any of the girls' hearts in a flutter,' Mrs Storey was saying. 'Mr Storey met him by appointment in Adchester yesterday, and it seems he has got red hair and freckles, and wears spectacles! It's a pity, I think myself, when there are so many nice girls about, you know; we might just as well have had a presentable looking young man whilst we were about it—but Mr Storey will never listen to what I say, and he hears that this Mr Dove is a good preacher and very earnest, and has got the highest testimonials.'

Would they never leave off talking and go! Lorry was almost in despair, when at last Mrs Storey gave a hopeful sign—she drew up her feather boa about her neck, and uttered a premonitory 'Well—' Lorry sprang to his feet

Drifting Apart

and moved towards the door briskly. His exhibition of joy was almost indecent.

Then Ambrosia herself must needs detain her a minute or two longer to ask her if she would invite Delia to the Vicarage.

‘Certainly, my dear, of course I will! We will get up some tennis this very afternoon for her. I will ask her as I go downstairs.’

At last the good-byes were spoken. Lorry joyfully threw open the door—but only to find, outside, Lord and Lady Aston toiling up the staircase! After that the stream of visitors went on without interruption. Then came the doctor—then more callers—never for one moment was she alone!

Once when the room was fairly full, and he could stand the drivel of talk no longer, Lorry strolled away downstairs.

‘Don’t go!’ said Ambrosia, looking at him as he left the room, more with her eyes than with her lips.

‘All right,’ he responded briefly.

He went downstairs, and found Delia in the drawing-room. He did not particularly want to see her, but he really could not stop on any longer upstairs trying to sit everybody else out.

Delia was labouring through her letter to

A Passing Fancy

Bernard. She had had one from him by the morning post—four pages of lover-like rapture. She was bound to answer it, but she found it very uphill work. She did not suggest to him that he should come down any earlier than Saturday.

When the door behind her opened and Lorry came in, she flung down her pen, and her whole face brightened.

‘At last!’ she cried joyfully. ‘I wondered how many more hours you were going to stop upstairs with Mrs Doyne!’

‘Why, I have not seen her one single minute alone since I arrived; the room has been full the whole morning!’

‘Well, you have had lots of amusement, then, whereas I have been as dull as a London fog! It was high time, I think, that you should come and see *me*!’

‘You have your love-letters to write, I imagine,’ he remarked significantly.

‘Oh, love-letters! I never wrote one in my life!’ she replied carelessly.

‘Yet I wouldn’t mind betting that you are writing now to Bernard!’

‘Well, you are right, I am. Would you like to read what I’ve said?’ holding out the half-written sheet to him.

Drifting Apart

‘God forbid!’ ejaculated Lorry, fervently. Delia did not seem offended. She threw back the half-written letter on the table with a laugh.

‘I’ve nothing to say to him,’ she remarked. ‘I don’t know how to fill the four sides. I wish you would help me!’

‘Help you to write your love-letter, Miss Goddard?’

‘Well, tell me something to tell him!’

‘You can tell him you are going to the Vicarage this afternoon.’

‘But I am not.’

‘Are you not? Why? Did not Mrs Storey ask you? I heard her say to Mrs Doyne that she was going to.’

‘Oh, yes, she asked me, but I refused.’

‘Why on earth—’

‘Well, you of all people ought not to ask! Have you forgotten that you promised to take me on the river?’

‘And you told Mrs Storey that?’

‘No, I only said I was already engaged for this afternoon.’

‘I am sorry. You could have thrown me over perfectly. I should not have minded.’

‘Thanks! But I don’t play lawn tennis.’

‘The Misses Storey would have taught you.’

A Passing Fancy

‘I would rather you taught me to row.’

Lorry did not respond to this remark as he should have done. He was honestly sorry that she held him to his promise, for when and how was he to get that interview with Ambrosia which he so much desired? Moreover, he told himself rigorously that it was not at all seemly that he should find himself involved, however unwillingly, in a quasi-flirtation with Bernard's *fiancée*.

She did not appeal to him so much as she had done last night, in that diaphanous green garment that had caused him to christen her Undine.

Her morning dress was neither so becoming nor so seductive. She was just as pretty, of course, but she seemed to be more silly, and he did not like her so well. Yet oddly enough her evident preference for himself was flattering to him. The story of his life had had its own special sweetness, no doubt, but it had never made any appeal to the inherent and deep-seated weakness that is in every man born of woman, whether or no he will admit it, or whether or no he has the grace and the talent to hide it.

That weakness is vanity.

The vanity of man is so great that it tran-

Drifting Apart

scends the vanity of every vain woman that ever lived.

The best men hide that vanity carefully and scupulously. But they can never destroy it. It is there all the same. And the women who are able to turn men to their own ends are those who understand how to play up to that secret and indestructible weakness, without showing that they are doing so.

Ambrosia Doyne was incapable of getting hold of a man at his weakest point; and she had too honest and generous a nature even to suspect the existence of the hidden disease.

Delia Goddard, on the contrary, had intuitions on the subject, which were, no doubt, born with her. To her, all men were alike in one respect. Just as a rope, many hundreds of feet long, is no stronger than it is at those few inches where it has worn itself away to one or two threads—so was she aware that a man, however strong, however clever, however loyal he may be all along the line, is in reality no stronger, no cleverer, no truer than at that faulty spot where vanity has rendered him an easy prey.

A woman who flatters a man cleverly, can do anything she likes with him.

Miss Goddard could scarcely have put this

A Passing Fancy

sentiment into words, because she was not clever enough to do so, but certain inherent instincts taught her perfectly well how to act up to it.

‘Don’t desert me. I have no one but you!’ she said to Lorry, looking up at him with troubled eyes and a sweet puckered brow of anxiety. She meant, of course, for the afternoon, but if she had been pleading for her whole after life, there could not have been more pathos in the upturned blue eyes, and the down-drawn corners of the little rosy mouth.

The ‘I have no one but you’ undid him!

‘Poor child!’ he said. ‘Well, then, I won’t desert you! We will have a jolly afternoon. I — I suppose this dreadful inundation of visitors is certain to go on all day, isn’t it?’

‘Oh, quite certain!’ she answered, with conviction.

‘I did rather want to see Mrs Doyne alone,’ he mused, doubtfully.

But that was just what Delia did not want. She had no desire at all that the friends should have an opportunity of comparing notes together concerning the occurrences of the previous evening.

‘She might be free later on. You will have a better chance then,’ she observed. ‘After her lunch she will have to rest, and then

Drifting Apart

the doctor is coming again—but later on—at tea-time, perhaps.’

‘Yes? I had better wait, then. I tell you what we will do—it is so fine, and as warm as June—I will go home now and bring round the boat at once, and my housekeeper shall put us up some lunch in the basket. I will take my rod, and we will go down stream. I can give you a lesson in sculling if you like, and fish a bit myself, and then I can pull you back.’

‘Oh, that will be nice!’ cried Delia, clapping her hands with a pretty childish movement of delight; ‘what a lovely time we are going to have! Go quickly that you may be back soon.’

He laughed at her enthusiasm, and went out by the window into the garden and disappeared round the corner of the house.

Five minutes later the last of the visitors had departed, and Ann came downstairs to look for Mr Hatton.

She put her head in at the drawing-room door. Only Delia was there, pinning on a little rose-garlanded straw hat before the looking-glass.

‘Beg pardon, miss, but have you seen Mr Hatton anywhere? My mistress is alone now, and wishes particularly to see him before she has her lunch.’

A Passing Fancy

‘Mr Hatton has gone, Ann.’

‘Gone, has he?’

‘Yes, he went away some minutes ago. I think he was tired of waiting.’

‘He will be coming back after his lunch, I daresay? did you hear him say, miss?’

No, Delia had not heard him say anything about it—and Ann retired.

Then she ran down the slope of the lawn towards the river—and sitting down on the very margin of the water, under a drooping willow, she waited patiently for the boat to come for her.

Now, the part of the garden where she waited was beyond a belt of shrubbery, and was not visible from the windows of the house.

And it was at this spot that, twenty minutes later, Lorry took in his passenger.

True, the boat on her downward way must pass full in view of the windows—true also that Hatton looked up at the boudoir windows as he pulled, hoping in vain for a glimpse of the woman whom he so much wanted to see.

There was no sign of her. At that precise moment she was, as it happened, trying to swallow a morsel of fish, which Ann had

Drifting Apart

brought to her on a tray, and the back of her head was turned towards the windows.

She had settled to have her lunch quickly, when she heard that Lorry had gone away, for she knew he would come back in the afternoon; and that he would want to see her as much as she wanted to see him.

After her meal she desired Ann to wheel her sofa into the window so that she could look out. In that way she would see him arrive. He was pretty certain to come down by water, she reflected.

Her injured foot pained her a good deal to-day, and in spite of her pluck and good spirits, which were indomitable, her pale face gave tell-tale evidence to the suffering she was enduring.

She watched the shimmering river for a long time, but nobody came.

Later on Ann came in with the information that Mr Hatton had taken Miss Goddard out in the boat. Sims had been puzzled because she was nowhere to be found when her luncheon was served in the dining-room, but one of the gardeners had brought in word that the Grange boat, with Miss Goddard in it, and Mr Hatton rowing, had gone down stream about an hour ago—and

A Passing Fancy

that he had observed the lunch basket in the stern of the boat.

For just one moment Ambrosia looked—well, not annoyed in the very least, but frankly bewildered. It was so thoroughly unlike Lorry and his ways; but then she recollected that she herself had sent a message to him through Delia yesterday, that he was to amuse her, and take her out on the river.

Of course he was only doing what she herself had asked him to do. It was very good-natured and kind of him, for Delia, who was a silly little thing—and, well, just a trifle second-rate, perhaps—could not possibly be interesting to such a man as Lorry.

‘Poor Lorry, how bored he will be!’ she thought. But it was decidedly unfortunate that he should have selected for this expedition the very one hour of the day when she happened to be completely alone!

However, if they had been gone an hour, they would certainly soon be back again, and she made Ann wheel her sofa round the other way, so that she could see down stream in the direction from which they must return.

And she watched a very long time. The

Drifting Apart

doctor came and went. He examined her injured foot and re-bandaged it, and wrote out a fresh prescription.

‘You look tired ; you have seen too many visitors, I expect. Take my advice and go to sleep, and don’t see any more to-day.’

‘I will only see one more,’ she had answered with a smile. ‘But I am afraid I can’t go to sleep.’

The doctor went, and the afternoon waned. The sun went down, and the glory of the day departed. But still Mrs Doyne lay alone on her sofa near the window, and still the boat did not return.

When at last, in the fast-gathering shadows of evening, the skiff shot in under the trees against the landing-stage, Lorry, having helped his companion out, and made fast the painter, strode quickly across the lawn into the house.

‘Can I see Mrs Doyne now?’ he asked of the first servant he met.

The message was sent upstairs, and the answer was brought back at once.

‘Ann is very sorry, sir, but Mrs Doyne has had a very restless afternoon, and been in a good deal of pain with her foot, and she has only just dropped off into a quiet sleep, and

A Passing Fancy

Ann says she could not have her disturbed for the world.'

'No, certainly not, quite right,' replied Mr Hatton, promptly, and he went straight out of the house back to his boat, and sculled himself up to his own abode.

There was some disappointment, no doubt, and a good deal of regret at the bottom of his heart. Nevertheless, his first and strongest feeling at the news that she was asleep, and unable to see him, was very distinctly and emphatically—*relief!*

CHAPTER VIII

BERNARD TO THE RESCUE

BERNARD DOYNE came down on the Saturday. His presence in the house announced itself by a great deal of noise, much angry shouting at the domestics, loud slamming of doors, and an overwhelming odour of tobacco smoke.

Mrs Doyne was downstairs on the sofa in the drawing-room for the first time when he broke noisily into her presence.

‘Hallo! what’s up?’ were his first words. For the moment he had completely forgotten that his mother had met with an accident.

She reminded him gently of the fact.

‘Oh, to be sure, you’ve come to grief; but I didn’t expect to find you tied by the leg still. What a fuss women always make over their ailings! Where on earth is Delia?’ he added, impatiently, not even caring apparently to inquire if his mother was better. Then he just stooped down and gave her a careless kiss,

A Passing Fancy

and his breath was so redolent of the odour of smoke that it nearly made her sick.

His eyes wandered eagerly round the room.

‘What have you done with Delia?’

‘My dear boy, I don’t keep her tied to my sash ends. Look for her yourself; there she is out on the lawn!’

He was outside the French window in a moment, rushing forward to meet his beloved in the most lover-like fashion.

After he had gone, Ambrosia surreptitiously dipped the corner of her handkerchief into some lavender water that stood on the table by her side, and applied it to the spot on her face that her son had touched. The trivial action was an index to the huge revolt and disgust her whole being experienced in her intercourse with her handsome son. How she hated his smoky kisses and his rude, rough words, and his utter lack of consideration for herself!

He was handsome, certainly. Mrs Doyne’s eyes followed the couple as they walked off side by side across the garden. They made a good-looking pair.

Delia wore a muslin dress flecked with pink. She carried a pink silk sunshade in her hand,

Bernard to the Rescue

and a bunch of pink La France roses nestled under her rounded chin.

She looked perfectly bewitching. Bernard bent his tall height down towards her. With his clean-cut features, and dark eyes, and close-curved black hair, his beauty was almost classical, and so were his broad shoulders and well-made limbs—no one could deny his good looks. Yet in some fashion they rarely created a favourable impression—‘A shifty face,’ said some; ‘A bad face,’ others called it.

But at this moment his face was illumined by the most humanising and softening influence which Bernard had yet ever admitted. For he was in love with his pretty *fiancée*—honestly and genuinely in love—and love rounded off the harsh angles of his character—towards Delia, at anyrate.

‘How lovely you look, my darling,’ he was saying; ‘even lovelier than you were in London, if that is possible. How have you got on here? How do you like Meadowlands?’

‘Oh, pretty well! only, of course, your mother’s accident has made it rather dull.’

‘Of course, my poor pet! Why didn’t you say that you were dull? I could have chucked

A Passing Fancy

my work yesterday and managed to come down, I think. I really had no idea the old lady was tied by the leg still.'

'Bernard, your mother is *not* an old lady.'

'No—well—not exactly. I was just going to say "worse luck," but I suppose that wouldn't be right, eh?' and he threw a droll look at her.

Delia did not understand.

'You mean she won't want to turn out of the house when you marry?'

'I mean, she is not likely to turn out of it at all, I am afraid, pet, till she dies.'

'But she *must*, Bernard, if you and I want it,' replied Delia, impatiently.

'Oh, there is no "must" about it, dear! You see the place is hers, though I suppose I am pretty certain to get it after her death.'

Delia stopped short. They were walking down one of the secluded shrubbery walks, shaded by laburnums and pink mayes in full flower. Bernard's arm had been round her waist, but Delia shook herself free now and faced him.

'But you told Mrs Johnson that Meadowlands belonged to you. I *know* you did.'

He laughed uneasily.

'Well, so it is, in a way—or it will be. One

Bernard to the Rescue

has got to make the best of things, you know, when one is put through one's facings by parents and guardians.'

'But surely you are of age; and if it was your father's—?'

'Yes, but that is just the devil of it, my pet. It wasn't my father's, it was the mum's always. It was *her* father who left it to her when he died. It's hers absolutely. She can sell it to-morrow if she chooses.'

Delia gasped. Here was indeed a total disillusionment!

'Well—but—how then—?'

'How are *we* to manage, you mean? Oh, I must worry her into doubling my allowance. I'm sure to be able to do that. Hang it all! I am her only son, and she *ought* to give me enough to live like a gentleman; that's why I wanted you to stop down here. You can do the wheedling if you are clever, and I can just speak my mind out; between us we'll work it right enough, never fear! If only that d——d Laurence Hatton doesn't put a spoke in the wheel! Horrid fellow that! Have you seen him yet, darling?'

'Mr Hatton?'

'Yes, the chap that lives over there at the Grange, you know; a deuced interfering beast,

A Passing Fancy

always trying to set the old lady against me. Hasn't he been here since you came?'

'Oh, yes, several times.'

'Well, of course, you hate him then, as much as I do—nasty, stuck-up prig. Is he at home, do you know?'

'No, I heard him say he was going away to-day for Sunday, to stay with his aunt at Adchester.'

'Old Lady Drumsel! Old Drumsticks, I call her! there's another of them for you! A horrid old woman, always preaching and nagging, and making goody-goody speeches at one! How I used to hate her when I was a kid; and her psalm-singing nephew, too! but I saw through his game years ago, and he's at it still now, I'll be bound!'

'What is his game?' inquired Delia, slowly. She had grown oddly silent and thoughtful all at once. 'Why do you hate Mr Hatton so much?' she added.

'Because it's as plain as a pikestaff that he wants to get Meadowlands himself.'

'Himself!—but—how can he?'

'Why, by marrying the old girl, of course!' laughed Bernard, coarsely.

She repeated the words below her breath,—

'*Marrying—Mrs Doyne!*' It was a whisper

Bernard to the Rescue

almost of horror. Her face lost all its pretty pinkness for a moment. It turned white and set—almost wild—then in a flame the blood rushed back, dying her cheeks and brow and neck a vivid crimson.

‘But that would be surely impossible!’ she cried angrily, ‘though your mother certainly looks very young, and is very handsome still. To be *your* mother she must be old—*years* older than Mr Hatton!’

‘So she is, but that makes no earthly difference to a chap like that. He thinks the Grange and Meadowlands thrown into one would make a nice little property for himself, d——n him! and of course the mum’s a fool, or she’d see through him too!’

Delia’s heart was thumping oddly beneath the muslin of her pretty dress. She tried to speak, but something seemed to choke her—disappointment and baffled vanity, an odd intermingling of sensations, both of them highly disagreeable, fought together in her breast. Yet she had an instinctive knowledge that she must show nothing. Bernard, who had certainly deceived the Johnsons and herself with regard to his prospects, must certainly not be allowed to guess at the dismay his careless words had evoked in her. To show, might be to risk all,

A Passing Fancy

and to risk all might mean a return to Wanlogo. Above all other things, a return to Wanlogo was out of the question.

Delia knew that she was not clever. She was aware that she was not highly educated ; aware, too, that she was scarcely brilliant in conversation or ready in wit, but she had certain intuitive perceptions with regard to men and their management, which, as I have already hinted at, stood her in good stead at critical moments. And there was also her beauty. A woman must be a fool indeed who, being beautiful, does not understand how far her looks may be reckoned upon to befriend her !

Delia was not such a fool as all that ! She allowed Bernard to resume his lover-like attitude, and when he passed his arm about her rose-ribbon-encircled waist, she leant confidently and tenderly against his arm, and turned her pretty, provocative face up towards his.

‘Don’t let us talk of all these nasty, tiresome, stupid things !’ she said, with a babyish pout of her red lips.

He kissed them, naturally, with much fervour, as she had meant him to do.

‘Right, my pet—’

‘We are so happy, dearest Bernard, are

Bernard to the Rescue

'We not? Why spoil this short, lovely time with horrid talk about money and stupid other people?'

'Why, indeed! Delia, where *do* you get such blue, blue eyes? They are like forget-me-nots, and your hair is like spun sugar. I can't think who you remind me of!'

'Is it—Undine?' inquired Delia, softly.

'Who's she?'

'Is she at the Empire, or—some of those places, do you think?'

Bernard wrinkled up his forehead. The magnitude of the subject required earnest thought. He shook his head.

'I really can't remember. She might have been. Was it that tight-rope dancer? or the girl who swallowed the knives at the Aquarium? Why do you ask?'

'Well, somebody said I was like her.'

'*Somebody!*' repeated Bernard, jealously, 'I hope that "somebody" is at the other side of the world! When did somebody say that to you?'

'Oh, a long time ago,' replied Delia, airily and lightly.

'Don't you ever make me jealous, little woman! I should be bad to tackle if I were jealous.'

A Passing Fancy

‘Of course I sha’n’t, you silly boy. I only wanted so much to know who Undine is.’

‘She must be deuced pretty if she is like you,’ retorted the infatuated youth. They were certainly very well suited to one another—these two!

Later on, upstairs in her own bedroom, Delia stood looking appreciatively at her pretty face in the looking-glass. Bernard was quite right; she had become prettier than ever. Perhaps the country air suited her; and her dress—a new one—was certainly becoming.

She liked all Bernard’s speeches, his open compliments that lost nothing from over delicacy, and his admiring looks. His kisses she cared less about than at first—kisses, save a means to an end, were tiresome things, she thought. For already this feather-brain creature was becoming a little weary of her conquest. Such an easy conquest it had been, too! he was so completely her slave—it began to be tedious!

Already she wanted fresh fields, more excitement, a wider horizon, something more piquant to suit her changeable moods and feed her craving vanity.

And then Bernard had deceived her about

Bernard to the Rescue

his prospects. She was not mercenary, as she had said herself—and to do her justice it was true—yet she wanted the things which money gives; could not, in fact, look forward to life without them.

Bernard, a mere dependant on what his wealthy mother chose to allow him, was a very different person to Bernard, his own master, and lord of Meadowlands. Mrs Doyne might live years—she did not look in the least as if she would die within a reasonable time. There was no reckoning upon that contingency.

And then Delia began to think of Mr Hatton. He flattered her vanity at present far more than Bernard did. There was no sort of doubt as to his position, and her fancy just now was to play the part of chatelaine of a country house. A country house filled with guests, picnics every day, and dances every night, and herself the centre of everything! If not at Meadowlands, why should not that delightful dream be fulfilled at the Grange?

Delia did not attach very much importance to what Bernard had said about Hatton's views with regard to his mother. It could not be true, and even if it were, the excitement of winning him away from Mrs Doyne

A Passing Fancy

would only add a keener zest to the enterprise. Delia had a fixed belief in the power of her own youth and beauty, as set against the maturer charms of a woman old enough to be her mother. No man in his senses, she believed, could hesitate for a moment between the two.

A woman of Mrs Doyne's age to be thinking of love and marriage! Why, it was positively indecent! She ought to be making clothes for the poor and reading her Bible, and otherwise preparing herself for her translation to a better world!

And Laurence Hatton was delightful, interesting, romantic! He more nearly resembled the heroes of her favourite novels than any other man she had ever met. Her volatile heart—that was in reality no heart at all—only a composite article made up of vanity and self-seeking, had already fluttered away from the allegiance, that was only a fortnight old, to the newer excitement of a fresh face and a more flattering conquest. And she had not wasted any time since she had been at Meadowlands—those three days of constant intercourse with Hatton on the river had certainly not been thrown away. Mrs Doyne, still upstairs in her room, happy

Bernard to the Rescue

to think that her young guest seemed amused and contented, had not realised to what this daily companionship might lead.

True that Ambrosia had had more than one interview with Lorry, but somehow the confessions and admissions on either side had never been made. Lorry had been a little constrained in manner, she herself a little cold. He had been kind, of course, but there had arisen between the old friends some undefined shadow which had robbed the short moments they had been alone together of all their wonted freedom and intimacy.

Ambrosia felt it, of course, but she was very far from divining the real meaning of it, and she was far too proud to speak of it. Nor when she thanked him warmly for his kindness to 'poor little Delia' could she have formed the remotest conception of how her words struck dagger-thrusts into his self-conscious heart.

'It will be all right when I am about again!' she told herself when the *tête-à-tête* so much longed for, so disappointing when it came, was over. And now, at this moment, with Bernard in the very house, Delia was actually marshalling her forces for action!

Surreptitiously she unclosed a drawer of her

A Passing Fancy

dressing-table, and took out from its wrappings of cotton wool and silver paper a newly-acquired treasure, which she had not yet dared to wear. A tiny enamelled watch set in diamonds; the very watch that Lorry had destined originally for Ambrosia!

How had it become transferred to Delia's keeping?

It is difficult exactly to explain the process; but it came about somewhat in this way.

It was yesterday afternoon under the shade of the willows down stream, where the Grange boat had lain moored for hours more than once during the last few days. Lorry's coat was off, and Delia had laid it across her knees. With the insolence of a spoiled child she had insisted upon rifling his pockets. He had protested in vain, half in jest and half in earnest. She only snatched the coat laughingly out of his reach, and with a resigned shrug of the shoulders he had allowed her her own way. The small parcel containing the trinket which he had brought with him once more with the vague idea of giving it to Ambrosia at a favourable moment naturally did not escape Miss Goddard's attention. Soon her active fingers had untied the wrappings and seized upon the jewelled watch. She uttered loud exclamations

Bernard to the Rescue

of delight and rapture. 'How perfectly lovely—how exquisite—how divine!'

Lorry watched her in moody silence. He had told himself before now that the purchase of that watch had brought him ill-luck—each time that he had put it into his pocket meaning to give it to her for whom it was destined, some evil fate had intervened to prevent him from doing so. Yesterday, indeed, he had seen her alone—but she had been cold to him—cold as ice—her mood was not propitious to the presenting of his offering. And Ambrosia was rather difficult in the matter of presents. Long ago she had set her face against his wasting his money, as she called it, on her. There must be some fitting occasion, some reasonable cause for the gift—and in this case there appeared to be none—save the desire to please her, and if he could not please her in himself, how could he hope to do so by giving her jewellery! He had felt yesterday as though she might fling back the watch in his face were he to presume to produce it. So it had remained in his coat pocket ever since.

Now, as he sat watching Delia's stumpy little fingers as they handled the trinket he had selected with so much care and love, to please other and dearer eyes than hers—he experienced

A Passing Fancy

a sudden hatred and rage against the unoffending object because it had become a symbol to him of disappointed hopes and futile castles in the air.

'I shall never give it to Ambrosia now,' he thought, as Delia fastened it on to the flap of her own white serge jacket.

'But what is it for?' she was asking eagerly. 'Who is it for?—I ought to say! Why, it is a *lady's* watch—who did you mean it for? is it yours? what do you intend to do with it?'

'It looks very well where it is,' replied Lorry, almost mechanically.

Miss Goddard uttered a little scream of delight.

'For *me*! did you intend it for *me*?' she cried, 'is that what you mean, Mr Hatton?'

'I mean what I say. It looks well on your dress—and as to who it was meant for, never mind about that! It is yours now if you care to keep it.'

That was how Delia came to be looking at it to-day, taking it furtively out of the locked drawer where she had hidden it.

She understood whom it had been meant for in the first instance, and, in the arrogance of her youth, she triumphed.

'It sha'n't be the last thing I take from her,

Bernard to the Rescue

either!' she said to herself, with a small smile of satisfaction. She closed the drawer with a snap, and locked it securely.

She was not going to wear that watch till Bernard was out of the way. It was no part of her scheme to fall between two stools.

CHAPTER IX

LADY DRUMSEL'S ADVICE

IT had been no surprise to Ambrosia that Hatton had gone away from home for the Sunday. It had almost always been customary to him to keep out of the way when Bernard came to Meadowlands, and she had been extremely glad of it. For they got on so badly together, those two, her son and her old friend—that she could only be thankful when the chances of an open quarrel between them were avoided. Bernard's manner to Hatton verged upon impertinence, whilst Lorry's irritation and indignation at the boy's disrespect and bad manners towards his mother could scarcely be controlled, even though, for her sake, he kept a strong guard over himself. Ambrosia was on thorns every time they met. Therefore she was not at all sorry that Lorry had gone to stay with his great-aunt for this particular Sunday, although she believed that, under the new circumstances, with Delia to occupy Ber-

Lady Drumsel's Advice

nard's time and thoughts, the usual ructions between the two would very probably not have taken place. She was very far, indeed, from guessing that Lorry had a twofold reason for avoiding Bernard to-day.

Old Lady Drumsel, who was a Hatton by birth, was the very dearest old woman in the world. She lived in a square red brick house on the outskirts of the country town of Adchester, about ten miles away from Anderley. It was the dower house of the Drumsel family, and the old lady had retired there at her husband's death, now many years ago, and had lived there ever since. She had had no children, and the Drumsel title and estates had passed to a nephew of her late husband's. She had, however, an ample dowry, out of which she had made considerable savings, that were destined to go, after her death, to her great-nephew.

She adored Lorry. He was the son of her favourite nephew, and the early deaths of his own parents had placed her almost in the position of a mother to him.

It was a joy to her beyond words when he came to stay with her, and this particular Sunday in May was one that she long remembered as a specially happy one.

A Passing Fancy

Lorry went to church with her in the morning, walking by the side of her Bath chair and helping her up the aisle to her pew on his arm. She was proud of him, and it gave her pleasure that her friends should see him thus escorting her up the church.

Then they lunched together, and afterwards they sat in the garden and talked. The garden was surrounded by a high wall, covered with creepers, and though it was not large in extent, Lorry used to say that he believed it contained every sweet and beautiful flower that bloomed in the world. The old lady loved her garden, and although she was well past seventy, she superintended the culture of her flowers herself, and knew all her plants by their names as if they were her children.

Behind them, as they sat in the shade of a spreading mulberry tree, stood the square brick house, nearly smothered beneath a magnificent magnolia, whose glossy foliage reached to the roof, and that must have taken centuries to develop to its present noble size. Two or three of the great waxen blossoms were in flower, and the air was filled with the rich, full fragrance of them. Before them a light arcade divided the lawn from the flower garden, and the arcade was one flash of

Lady Drumsel's Advice

glory with the wealth of crimson ramblers in full bloom.

There was a delicious cawing of rooks from the elm trees at the end of the garden, and beyond them was just a glimpse of the grey tower of the church where they had worshipped in the morning, with a cloud of pigeons whirling about it, whilst the blue sky of midsummer filled in the rest of the picture.

Lady Drumsel was perfectly happy, and if Lorry was not so, he was at anyrate at peace, chiefly, probably, because he was smoking a pipe. Moreover, the garden of Drumsel Lodge was distinctly a peaceful spot. One felt here to be very far removed from the cares and anxieties of the world. Like the venerable old age of the dear lady who lived in it, it was full of hushed rest and quiet.

'I have a great deal I want to say to you, my dear Lawrence,' remarked Lady Drumsel, breaking in upon a delightful silence, wherein the rooks and the bees had had it all their own way.

Probably Lorry knew what was coming, for a faint flush seemed for a second to pass across his face, but he smiled and bade her 'Say on.'

'I am getting old, my dear Laurence, and so you must excuse me if I am indiscreet—'

A Passing Fancy

‘You could never be indiscreet, dear aunt.’

‘Well, at least you will forgive me if I am. It is your future, my dear boy, that troubles me a good deal.’

‘My future,’ he repeated. ‘Have I any future, aunt?’

‘That is just what I want to know, my dear Laurence. Oh, I am not thinking about money! I suppose you must be comfortably off, for your method of living is probably well within your income. Besides, as I have told you before, all that I have been able to save, will come to you. It is not much, but such as it is—’

‘Dear aunt, pray do not speak of it,’ interrupted Lorry, and he raised the frail, withered hand to his lips with a pretty movement of affection. ‘You are so good to me,’ he murmured.

‘Well, I want you to be good to me before I die, my boy. I want you to bring a wife with you to see me.’

Lorry sighed. He crossed and uncrossed his legs and puffed away at his pipe.

‘Are you going to live and die a bachelor, Lorry?’

‘God knows!’

‘But you have no right to leave it like that,

Lady Drumsel's Advice

my dear. More is expected of you than that. A family like ours ought not to be allowed to die out without an effort to preserve it.'

'Marriage is a serious matter,' remarked Lorry, vaguely. 'It requires thinking about.'

'Well, you have taken over thirty years to think about it,' retorted the old lady, quaintly. 'That is more time than enough, I think. Look here, Laurence, this matter is of great importance to me, and I am going to speak out for once quite plainly. Are you still eating your heart out for Ambrosia Doyne?'

Lorry lay back in his wicker arm-chair and stretched his arms up over his head and looked straight in front of him. He made no reply, and after a keen glance and a little pause, Lady Drumsel went on,—

'Because if you are, I am going to say what I think about it. She is not at all the sort of wife a Hatton of Hatton ought to marry. No, no! I am not going to say anything against her, my dear; I like her very much. As a girl—long before *you* were out of the nursery—she was a perfectly charming and delightful creature. I make no doubt that she is charming and delightful still, but you ought not to marry her, because she is too old for you—too old to give you an heir probably, and an heir, after all, is

A Passing Fancy

what Hatton of Hatton Grange ought mainly to think about—'

Lorry sat up in his chair and opened his mouth to speak, but the old lady held up her hand.

'Hear me out first, my dear. What I am going to say is, that although there are these grave objections against her, still, if your heart is irrevocably fixed upon her, it would be far better to marry her and have done with it, and be happy your own way, than to go on as you are now, sinking year by year into a deeper solitude of lonely bachelorhood. Marry her, my dear, and bring her here for me to kiss before I die.'

Lorry gave a little short laugh, and stooping forward he knocked the ashes out of his pipe against the edge of his boot.

'My dearest aunt, your advice is no doubt excellent; but there is one thing you have not taken into consideration, and that is Ambrosia herself! Ambrosia has persistently refused to marry me.'

'Is that so? But it seems to me quite impossible that she should not love you. No woman could see you every day of her life and not love you, Laurence.'

'Ambrosia probably forms the one exception

Lady Drumsel's Advice

to the flattering deduction you are kind enough to make.'

'Has she told you she does not love you?'

'She has told me that she will not marry me over and over again. I take it that is the same thing.'

Old Lady Drumsel was thoughtful. 'I am not sure that it is,' she resumed. 'If I were you, I would not ask her to marry you next time. I would simply ask her to love you.'

She was a very shrewd old lady this, and she had not lived seventy-five years in vain.

In the days that were to come, Lorry remembered that remark of hers, and bitterly regretted the blindness that had made him disregard her advice.

For he only shook his head, and replied with determination, 'No, I shall never ask Ambrosia for anything any more. There comes a point in every man's love when he cannot go on prostrating himself at the feet of a cold woman without entire loss of self-respect. To that point I have arrived.'

For a few moments there was silence. 'You do not tell me that you have ceased to love her?' queried Lady Drumsel, presently. Her keen ears had detected the accent of bitterness in his words, and she well knew that as long as

A Passing Fancy

bitterness exists, love still flourishes side by side with it. It is out of indifference that the grave-clothes of love are woven.

As he made no reply to her tentative question, she said presently,—

‘Are you going to condemn yourself to a lonely life for ever, then?’

‘No,’ he answered, after a slight pause. ‘I do not think so. I see quite as well as you do, my dear aunt, how desirable it is that I should marry and have an heir—it is, in fact, as you have suggested, almost a duty. And moreover, I am not without human longings by any means. A bright young wife, children of my own, a long-silent house filled once more with the echo of happy voices, the patter of little feet—these are things which I am not ashamed to admit that I have long hankered for.’

Lady Drumsel drew a long breath. ‘Ah—ah! and so you have seen the girl who is to bring you all this?’

The colour rushed in a flame all over his face. How quickly she had read through his inmost thoughts—and how horrible those thoughts would be if put into plain, every-day words! For—yes—she was right enough. But how was he to put it, even to himself, that this girl of his dreams had taken the tangible

Lady Drumsel's Advice

form of one who was already pledged to marry the son of his old friend?

But indeed no such definite idea had as yet threatened to tarnish his honour. It was only, he told himself, that through her, perhaps, and her influence, thoughts of some other similar maiden, fresh and loving and fascinating, had quite latterly come to take the place of that other who was so cold and seemingly so far beyond his reach.

Lady Drumsel's words awoke him to his danger. He hastened to disclaim with some warmth,—

‘No—indeed, no! Nothing of the sort! I have seen no one; or if I have met anyone who at all resembles the wife whom perhaps it would be wise for me to marry, and make myself as happy as I can with—why, that suggestive maiden is not one to whom it is in my power to offer myself and my half-played-out life. Yet there are possibly several charming girls in the world who might perhaps be good enough to think kindly of me.’

‘Without a doubt, my dear!’ assented Lady Drumsel, heartily; ‘and I am very glad indeed that you are coming round to the sensible way of looking at the question. If you cannot—if you are *sure* you cannot win the woman who would make you most happy—then make

A Passing Fancy

up your mind to seek for one who will bring you the next best measure of happiness procurable, together with those blessings of home and children you have spoken of, only, my dear Laurence, for the sake of the traditions of our family, see that she is of gentle birth, and that she is true, and pure, and good—a woman worthy to be the mother of your children. Remember that of the Hatton race there has never been a dishonourable son—never a dishonest daughter. These things, I believe, are in the blood. If Ambrosia Doyme were younger, and if she loved you—which you say she does not—then, who better than she could have filled your mother's place? For she is all that; good and true, and a lady down to the very uttermost fibre of her being. Yet, since she has been put out of your thoughts, I do not doubt that there are many others who are as fitted as she, and who would bring you in addition that amount of youth and health needed to carry on an old race that must not be allowed to become extinct with yourself.'

For some moments again there was silence. Lorry filled his pipe anew and lit it.

'Someone like Delia,' he said to himself, as the flame lighted up his features for a moment with a brilliant gleam.

Lady Drumsel's Advice

'*She* is, of course, out of the reckoning, but someone like her there must be.'

After all, the type of Delia Goddard could not be difficult to find; granting even that one regarded her through the rose-coloured spectacles of imagination. Pretty and sweet, young and affectionate, not very clever, perhaps—it does not require cleverness to become the mother of a healthy baby, and, of course, being a mother, the 'someone like Delia' would be certain to be fond of it and to bring it up properly. That does not necessitate brains either. Brains are very good things in a woman whom one loves with one's whole heart and soul, but if one does not—well, in that case, might not the brains possibly be rather a tiresome item? Is not a wife and a mother almost better without them? Ah, stupid, short-sighted man creature! Can a clever man ever find companionship with a fool? and if there is no companionship, then where is the happiness?

Why are they never warned in time, these hundreds of men with brains and minds and thinking souls, who annually give themselves over for life into the keeping of pretty, empty creatures to whom personal adornment is the very shibboleth of being? who have no con-

A Passing Fancy

versation save about their clothes and about the clothes of their babies! no interests save the petty gossip of their acquaintance, and the flutters of vanity and emulation in their own empty little heads?—women who never read any book but a novel, and who are at sea if anything but the most trivial and frivolous conversation is going on about them.

A great deal has been said about the unhappiness of married life, and mainly the fault is laid at the door of certain unkind and unfaithful husbands who neglect noble and much-injured wives, yet surely there is another side of the question that is at least equally true.

The men of sense and of mind who rush into marriage with brainless fools are many more in number than the men who are unfaithful and cruel to excellent women; bad husbands are, in England at anyrate, rare. But the clever men who marry fools and are miserable ever after are as the grains of sand on the seashore for multitude. Let the fools mate with fools—there are plenty of them of both sexes, God knows!

Yet over and over again sensible men continue to choose their wives for their faces alone, for their minds hardly ever. Yet the face fades quickly, whilst the mind lasts on to the end.

CHAPTER X

A MORNING ON THE RIVER

IN the early days of the week Ambrosia was out of doors and about again. She still limped a little, and was obliged to refuse to join a bicycling expedition to which she was invited, and which on Delia's account she was not sorry for an excuse to get out of. She felt that she had, owing to unfortunate circumstances, been somewhat neglectful of her young guest, and she was now honestly determined to make friends with the girl and to try and get on with her.

There had been some conversation between herself and Bernard on the Sunday with regard to ways and means, which had ended, as such conversations usually did, in the young man's having it pretty much his own way. Ambrosia had promised to make over a substantial slice of her fortune, subject to certain restrictions, to her son on his marriage. The money was to be properly invested in safe securities, to be

A Passing Fancy

placed in the hands of trustees, and to be so tied up that no tampering with the capital would be possible. Moreover, Bernard was to give her a written promise that he would persevere with his legal studies and take up the Bar as a fixed profession as soon as he had passed the necessary examination. He might marry Delia in August if he wished, and he was to take a house in London, in an inexpensive neighbourhood, which Mrs Doyne undertook to furnish for him by the date of his wedding. It might be supposed that these concessions were as liberal as they could possibly be; indeed, they were far more so than Lorry, who had framed the outlines of them, had originally intended; but Bernard, who was never decently grateful for anything, grumbled a great deal over them, and it was only when on the verge of an open quarrel with his mother, who told him bluntly that he might 'take it or leave it,' that he sulkily consented to be satisfied. Ambrosia had indeed thrown in the furnishing of the London house as an extra, as it were, and was exasperated because he did not receive the proposal with any gratitude, but with considerable dissatisfaction, because the house was to be in Earl's Court or West Kensington.

A Morning on the River

One remark that he had made to her, however, had struck her as being a sensible one, and had moved her to doing the utmost she could for him.

‘It’s not as if I wanted to marry beneath me,’ he had said. ‘If I had brought home a barmaid or a ballet-girl to you as a wife, you might have been justified in screwing me down; but even then, you would have been bound to provide me with the means of living. But you can’t complain of Delia; she is a lady, and a lovely girl, you must admit that.’

‘I do admit it,’ replied Mrs Doyne, frankly, with that strong sense of justice which always actuated her; and so deeply imbued is the modern mother with that haunting fear concerning possible barmaids and ballet-girls, and even worse social depths to which their sons may, in these advanced days of civilisation, descend in search of a wife, that she is a wise woman who knows how to be sincerely thankful if only, whatever else her drawbacks, the girl her son marries is ‘at least a lady.’ Delia was not, perhaps, very thoroughbred, but she would pass muster, and it was out of regard for that redeeming feature of the case that Ambrosia promised to furnish the London home for the young couple.

A Passing Fancy

But when Bernard, with a want of delicacy of feeling that was almost inconceivable, proceeded to press his mother upon the subject of the disposition of her property after her death, her temper not unnaturally rose, and she became very angry.

‘I think I have a right to ask if it is certain that I am to have Meadowlands after your death,’ he had said to her.

‘You have no right to ask anything of the sort,’ she had replied warmly.

‘I have at least a right to look forward to its being left to me,’ he persisted.

‘You have not the shadow of such a right! Meadowlands is mine absolutely, and I can leave it to whom I please. I do not say that I will *not* leave it you, but if it suits me to leave it to anybody else—’

‘To that fellow Hatton who sits in your pocket and takes care to prejudice you against your own son, I suppose!’ he sneered insolently.

Ambrosia’s colour rose.

‘Take care, Bernard! Insult is what I will not submit to from you. It is, in fact, the surest way to deter me from doing as you wish.’

That silenced him. He muttered a sulky apology with averted eyes. He saw that he had gone just a step too far for his own in-

A Morning on the River

terests, and for that reason he regretted his words, but he was not in the least sorry because he had wounded and insulted his mother. But as he was dependent upon her he knew that he could not afford to quarrel with her.

‘At least, I hope you like Delia?’ he said, changing ground after a moment’s silence. ‘You must surely admire her?’

Ambrosia swallowed down her wrath. It was a process she was always going through with Bernard. She said to herself for the hundredth time, ‘He is my only child, I must not quarrel with him.’

She replied to his questions frankly and pleasantly.

‘I admire her very much, she is exceedingly pretty, and I hope I shall learn to like her also. I have, unfortunately, seen very little of her since she came, owing to this tiresome accident of mine, but now I am going to try and make friends with her as much as I can.’

And it was in accordance with this determination that, as soon as she was about again, Ambrosia invited the girl to come out on the river and be initiated into the art of punting.

It was a lovely morning, and it was the first of June. Delia, a dainty picture in white muslin and blue ribbons, stepped into the punt;

A Passing Fancy

and Mrs Doyne pushed off from the landing-steps into the middle of the stream. Ambrosia punted excellently, and her slender figure and almost girlish outlines of arm and head were never seen to greater advantage than when engaged in this her favourite exercise.

The younger woman was forced to admit to herself that this mother of Bernard's was indeed a very wonderful person. She was vaguely envious of her youthful appearance, which was so perfected by the more matured charms of her riper years as to present a very formidable rivalry to her own less developed beauty. By what magic did a woman, who must certainly be at least forty, manage to retain such a long lingering of the attractions of her youth? What had she done to make herself look like that?

Delia sought in vain for the rouge and the hair dye. The June sunshine poured fully down upon Ambrosia's upturned, unshaded face, and revealed no tell-tale secrets of the toilet.

Her thoughts broke unguardedly from her lips into words.

'I can't think how you manage to look as you do. You look five-and-twenty!' and in

A Morning on the River

the tone of the words there was not admiration, so much as the suggestion of a grievance.

Ambrosia laughed. 'You want to know how it's done!' she replied merrily. 'There is no mystery, I assure you! I get up with the sun and I go to bed almost with the birds, and all day long I lead a wholesome, active life, full of fresh air and exercise I use no other devices, my dear. But these kind of things run in families, I think; my people always kept young for their age. Now take the pole, Delia, and listen to my instructions.'

But Delia was very stupid at it. She did not seem able to learn; as a matter of fact, she did not want to learn. She covered herself with water, made herself hot and red in the face, and ran the punt violently about from bank to bank. At last she flung down the pole impatiently and retreated to the cushions.

'I shall never do it!' she cried. 'I hate doing things of this kind.'

'But Mr Hatton has been teaching you to row, has he not?'

'Oh, just a little. I can row a little, but I shall never make much of it.'

Besides, she might have added, that was a very different matter! To receive lessons in any art from a man with whom one has a desire to

A Passing Fancy

flirt, is vastly more interesting than to be given instructions by a woman.

‘Well, it is perhaps unfair to expect you to pick up river lore all at once. When you have learnt to scull you shall try to punt again; meanwhile, I will do the work.’ And Mrs Doyne was proceeding to slip down stream when Delia remarked,—

‘Do let us go up to the Grange, Mrs Doyne.’

‘Why? Oh, I never bother Mr Hatton in the morning.’

It need not bother him if we pass in front of his house. I have never yet seen the Grange from the river.’

Ambrosia turned the punt slowly and proceeded up stream. The wish was a very natural one after all, with no harm in it whatever.

She herself, being a wise woman, had always been exceedingly careful as to going to the Grange. She was aware that the world, and the world of a village community most especially, is very censorious, and although she received Lorry almost daily in her own house, she hardly ever went to his—never, indeed, when alone. She was so scrupulously careful about this little matter, that she scarcely ever even went up stream past the Grange gardens.

A Morning on the River

She would not have it said by his servants that she came in search of him.

But Delia was with her, and there could be no possible indiscretion about it to-day.

So she punted up stream, past the shady woods and the picturesque boathouse, past the sun-bathed lawn and the gay-coloured garden, behind which the grey old ivy-covered house presented a venerable façade to the silver stream that wound its quiet, curving way at its feet.

When they were out of sight of it all, Delia prayed her hostess to go back so that she might see its beauties again. She had noticed—which Ambrosia had not—that Hatton had been looking out of one of the lower windows of the house as the punt passed up stream at the bottom of his lawn. When they arrived back in front of the house he was standing by the edge of the river looking out for them.

‘Why, there is Mr Hatton himself!’ cried Delia.

Ambrosia turned round, she had been punting mechanically, with her back to the Grange grounds.

Hatton lifted his straw hat to the two ladies.

Of course, Ambrosia turned the punt into the bank. In spite of herself her heart warmed

A Passing Fancy

at the sight of him. He was her Lorry after all! her faithful love whom neither time nor rebuff could change; and although a small cloud had somehow arisen between them, just in these later days, yet her heart was fixed in its conviction that it only wanted one word from herself to disperse it. Was he not her own always, and ever?

‘Get in, Lorry, and come back to lunch with us,’ she said pleasantly, pushing the punt’s nose into the scented rushes on the bank. Lorry obeyed her, floundering in awkwardly over the reeds, and Ambrosia laughed in her own frank, sunshiny way.

She was so glad to see him. Surely he, too, must be glad! She wanted to tell him all about Bernard and what she had settled with him, and she wanted to hear about Lady Drumsel too. She had not seen him since his visit to his great-aunt. Yet it did not seem to him that she was any more glad to see him than usual. Her frank friendliness had always been the same. Ambrosia did not wear her heart upon her sleeve, and it did not occur to her to throw any extra warmth into the sweet, calm eyes that were always kind, yet always, to his mind, a little cold.

But when he sat down by Delia in her soft

A Morning on the River

muslin draperies, what subtle flashes of feeling did he not suddenly seem to perceive in her charming face? The heightened colour, the downcast eyes, the little flutter of the rosy lips, all suggested to him some depth of emotion which he did not quite understand. Was it the lover from whom she had so lately parted who had conjured up that shade of tender softness in her voice and manner? Hatton caught himself wishing Bernard at the other side of the world. The fellow was not fit to tie her shoe-string! a cub, an ill-mannered boor! What could she have seen in him? She was miles and miles too good for him!

Delia made room for him on the cushions of the punt with a glad smile of welcome, and when her eyes met his, he could not help realising that she looked very pleased to see him.

‘Have you had a happy time, little lady, since I have been away?’ he asked her kindly.

‘I?’ Delia lifted her blue eyes in surprise, then she shook her yellow head. ‘I am happy *now*,’ she said meaningly.

As Lorry was not a coxcomb, he merely imagined that things had been satisfactorily arranged for her future, and that Ambrosia had been liberal to the young people. Possibly the Sunday might not have been altogether

A Passing Fancy

delightful; there might have been ructions. However, if she was happy now, probably everything had been smoothed over.

‘I only hope poor, dear, generous Ambrosia has not denuded herself,’ he thought. ‘Bernard does not deserve a penny from her, but for the sake of this pretty child doubtless she has made some sacrifices.’

Ambrosia punted them slowly down stream; in fact, the flowing river almost carried the punt down of herself. She stood up opposite to them at the further end of the boat; a tall, graceful figure in white, framed in by a background of shimmering green willows, her small thoroughbred head thrown a little back, her eyes fixed on beyond, her bronze-red hair just touched now and again by the golden gleam of a stray sunbeam piercing the overhanging branches. Many a time had Laurence Hatton faced her as he was doing now, and watched her beauty with a hushed sense of delight, whilst he told himself that the whole world did not contain another woman so noble and so entrancing as Ambrosia Doyne.

To-day, he simply did not look at her at all. He talked to Delia. Every word that he spoke to her might have been published upon the house-tops, but, as a matter of fact, the

A Morning on the River

voices of her two passengers were low, and Ambrosia did not hear what they were saying. This did not trouble her in the least. Ambrosia had that breadth of nature which is incapable of small envies and jealousies. She was, indeed, glad that he should be kind and pleasant to her young guest, although it went through her mind with some amusement and a grain of faint surprise, to notice that he seemed to have a good deal to say to her.

‘She seems really to interest him,’ she thought. ‘I wonder that she does, for Lorry has brains, and poor, dear, pretty little Delia is, I am afraid, sadly deficient in that commodity.’

Then, just as she turned the punt deftly towards her own landing-stage, something caught her eye. It was the flash of the sun upon a circlet of diamonds upon Delia’s bosom.

‘Why, Delia!’ she called out gaily, ‘what is that perfectly lovely thing you are wearing? A watch set in diamonds, is it not? I never noticed it before. Ah! by your tell-tale blush I can guess where you got it! It is that extravagant boy Bernard who brought it to you from London! Am I not right?’

Lorry, at the moment, was stooping down. He was securing the chain of the punt to the

A Passing Fancy

landing-stage. The two ladies were already on shore.

What demon of mischief prompted the girl's answer?

Was it merely the reckless delight of a childish triumph? or was it something less pardonable? The desire to wound and trample upon this other woman who was good to her, yet towards whom she had begun to entertain a dull and resentful envy, an envy as senseless as it was irrational? At anyrate, here was the feminine weapon thrust ready into her hand, and Delia proceeded to use it.

'Oh, no, Mrs Doyne, you are quite wrong! It was not Bernard at all. It is lovely, is it not? Mr Hatton gave it to me.'

'*Mr Hatton!*' Ambrosia repeated his name blankly. Lorry had finished securing the chain. He stood upright in the punt, facing her; he was deeply flushed, perhaps that was owing to the exertion of stooping. Ambrosia, on the contrary, was strangely pale.

Their eyes met in utter silence. After a moment the man's fell abashed.

Ambrosia turned away with a short laugh.

'Oh, I understand,' she remarked lightly. 'A wedding present! It is the first you have received, is it not, my dear?'

A Morning on the River

And for the life of her, as they all three walked up the lawn together towards the house, Delia Goddard could not tell whether or no the shot had gone home.

CHAPTER XI

IN STORM AND CRISIS

DELIA had been restless all day. Perhaps that might have been on account of the weather. Heavy, blue-black clouds had, since morning, obscured the sky, and there had been low rumblings of distant thunder now and again. One or two large splashes as big as half-crowns had fallen upon the steps of the terrace, presaging a storm, but nothing had come of them, and the rain still held off. It was, however, oppressively hot, and all the doors and windows of the house remained wide open all day.

Delia could settle to nothing. She wandered about the house aimlessly and idly; if she took up a book for a moment it was only to fling it aside presently, with a wide yawn of boredom; or she would sit down to the piano and strum a few bars of a waltz tune, only to

In Storm and Crisis

get up again almost immediately with an impatient crash of her hands upon the keys, and then walk listlessly back to the windows.

Looking out of window was indeed what had been her chief employment during the day, and she looked principally in the direction of the Grange. She wanted Hatton to come, but he did not. He had not been to Meadowlands since the morning he had lunched with them immediately after that unfortunate revelation concerning the watch. That had been on the Tuesday, and to-day was Friday—and to-morrow Bernard would be back again. Oh! A chair near her suddenly fell over with a noisy crash.

Ambrosia looked up with a little frown from her writing-bureau. How irritatingly busy and well employed Mrs Doyne always seemed to be! Indoors or out of doors she was never idle.

‘My dear, can’t you get something to do?’ she inquired gently. ‘Have you no book? There is a box just come from Mudie’s; won’t you open it and find yourself something to read?’

‘I can’t read, I have such a headache.’

‘It is very close, certainly. Do you never knit, or sew, or embroider?’

A Passing Fancy

Delia shook her head wearily.

‘Or write letters?’ persisted her hostess, smiling.

Bernard’s two last letters, both unanswered, were lying upstairs in her writing-desk, but Delia did not say so.

‘I am almost sorry that I am obliged to leave you this evening, my dear child,’ went on Mrs Doyne, kindly. ‘I half wish I had thrown over this dinner engagement, but it is a special occasion, you see. Mr and Mrs Taunton are old friends, and it is their silver wedding-day. They would be very much disappointed if I did not go, but, really, I don’t half like leaving you alone.’

‘Oh, don’t think of that, pray! I don’t mind being left alone in the least,’ Delia hastened to assure her. ‘I can amuse myself perfectly with the books from Mudie, or, if my head aches very badly, I shall go to bed early.’ She spoke a little eagerly and breathlessly, perhaps, but Ambrosia did not notice it. Later on she remembered it.

‘Then to-morrow there will be Bernard again, and so you must console yourself by looking forward to that,’ said Mrs Doyne, smiling, as she dipped her pen into the ink and resumed her writing.

In Storm and Crisis

‘Yes—there will be Bernard,’ murmured Delia, half to herself.

A little silence in the room. Outside, a few more threatening drops came heavily down on the stone steps of the terrace, and a distant flash of sheet lightning made an instant’s glare over the meadows; then after a long moment more a low rumble of distant thunder growled ominously. Then Delia asked a question.

‘Will Mr Hatton be at this silver-wedding dinner-party to-night?’ It was the first time for nearly three days that his name had been spoken between them.

‘I really have not the slightest idea.’ In spite of her utmost efforts Ambrosia’s voice was cold as ice. ‘Do you wish to send him any message?’ she added, with a strong effort at self-control.

Delia yawned ostentatiously. ‘Oh, no, it was merely an idle question!’

After another moment Mrs Doyne spoke again, this time quite gently and patiently.

‘I really don’t know if Mr Hatton has been invited, but I think most probably not. He has never been intimate with the Tauntons, and this is to be a gathering of intimate friends only.’

A definite idea began to form itself in Delia’s

A Passing Fancy

mind. She suddenly felt herself to be perhaps on the verge of a crisis. In spite of her yawns and her boredom, to-day was possibly destined to be one of the most exciting days of her life! She began to long for action, and she was restless because she could not sit still and do nothing any longer. Her fickle fancy was set upon a new desire. She was tired of the last toy—it was to be thrown aside—and all the woman's wit was awake in her to catch at the new plaything that seemed to be dangling just beyond her reach. Delia had all a French-woman's keen delight in intrigue. She possessed the *finesse* of a finished actress beneath the bland innocence of the *ingénue*.

In due time Mrs Doyne dressed and went off in the brougham to her dinner-party.

'Good-night, Delia,' she said to her young guest, when the moment came for her to start. And she placed her hand on Delia's shoulder and kissed her on the forehead.

She looked very beautiful in her diamonds and her gold-embroidered satin dress, and in the long, rich-hued mantle of brocade that enveloped her from throat to heel.

'You will have gone to bed and be fast asleep, no doubt, when I come back.'

'Yes, Mrs Doyne.'

In Storm and Crisis

‘Then I will take care not to disturb your beauty sleep.’

The carriage started, and Delia was summoned to her solitary dinner. It did not take her very long to finish it. She had not changed her dress from the navy-blue serge skirt she had worn all day. She was up in her bedroom for some time after the meal was over—doing something mysterious, apparently—for the housemaid, coming to her door soon afterwards, found it locked, and went away again.

Presently the evening closed in, and, owing to the shadows of the heavy clouded sky, it grew dark earlier than usual.

Delia had put on a hat and a thick jacket, when presently she came creeping out of her bedroom door, and she carried something heavy in her hand. She peeped out cautiously. The house was very still. The servants were probably having their supper, or gossiping in the servants’ hall, for the far-away sound of a laugh struck faintly upon her ears.

She turned and locked the bedroom door behind her and hid the key under the mat outside. Then she slipped downstairs, out at the garden door and across the lawn down to

A Passing Fancy

the river side. Nobody saw her go. She did not feel in the least nervous or frightened, only brimful of excitement. She was not very clever at untying the painter and pushing the boat out into the stream, but she managed it somehow, after some amount of awkward splashing with the sculls.

‘Where there’s a will there’s a way!’ she said to herself. ‘What fun this is!’ She looked back at the house, now fast fading into the grey shadows of the evening. ‘I’ve had enough of Meadowlands, any way,’ she muttered, ‘and of beautiful Mrs Doyne and her highly respectable household, and of Bernard—ugh! how I hope I may never see any one of them again!’

Then the big raindrops began to patter down, and the long-deferred storm broke at last.

Hatton was sitting alone in his library. The lamp was lighted, and he had drawn up his own particular arm-chair to the table. He was very much interested in his book, which was an account of some recent explorations and excavations in Syria—a whole city had lately, it appeared, been unearthed in those far-away mysterious lands, and every classical authority in civilised Europe was agog with excitement and garrulous with conflicting theories about it.

In Storm and Crisis

As a rule, the curtains were closely drawn in the library after dinner at the Grange, but to-night, owing to the oppressive heat, only transparent lace curtains fell before the long French windows. The windows themselves, however, had been carefully shut by Mrs Makin as soon as the storm broke. Hatton was absorbed in his book ; nevertheless, a little tapping noise against the window-pane ended by attracting his attention. It had been going on for some minutes before he heard it at all, and just at first he thought it was only the rain. But presently a curious intermittence in the sounds caused him to throw back his head and listen more attentively. Tap, tap—then a pause—then tap, tap, tap again—then another pause. Surely it must be a stray branch of rose or ivy that was stirred by the fitful gusts of wind into those curious, human-like taps! ‘The fingers of the night,’ he murmured, recalling some half-forgotten poem.

Then it came again—rapid and loud—three taps in succession.

He looked earnestly towards the window—all beyond the close-drawn, white lace draperies was wrapped in darkness.

Nevertheless, so insistent now became the

A Passing Fancy

sounds without, that at last he pushed away his book, and, rising from his chair, walked across the room to investigate the matter. He drew back the lace curtain and peered out into the darkness. At first he could see nothing, but presently a tremulous flash of sheet lightning revealed a cloaked form outside—a white face, draggled yellow hair and bare hands uplifted as it were in entreaty.

He unlatched the window with a smothered exclamation of surprise, and threw it wide open.

‘Good Heavens! Why, *Undine*!—a veritable Undine indeed!—is it *you*?’ and he drew back so that she might enter. She half stumbled into the room across the threshold, and instinctively he put out his hand to prevent her from falling; it became straightway drenched with the rain which was pouring off her sodden jacket and dress, and fell in a cascade of drops from the brim of her straw hat. As she came in she set down something black and heavy just inside the window. He did not, however, notice this manœuvre. His eyes, at the moment, were fixed in wide astonishment upon his unexpected visitor. She uttered a little gasp of relief.

‘Oh, I thought you’d never, never open the window!’ she exclaimed breathlessly.

In Storm and Crisis

‘My dear child, you are absolutely wet through! What on earth has happened? Have you been into the river?’

‘Oh, no; but I came in the boat, you know.’

‘In the boat!’ he repeated in astonishment, ‘in this downpour of rain? Good Heavens! is anything wrong at Meadowlands?’ he added, with a sudden pang of apprehension.

‘Nothing that I know of. Mrs Doyne is quite well, if that is what you mean. She has gone out to dinner—’

‘And you were left alone? Why—?’

The question died on his lips. Delia sank down on the arm-chair he had lately occupied, took her handkerchief out of her pocket, buried her face in it and proceeded to break into a passion of tears. Her whole frame shook and trembled with great, heaving sobs, her bowed shoulders seemed to be rent with grief. Hatton, in common with three-fourths of the unmarried men of the world, had an instinctive horror of tears. The sight of a weeping woman always filled him with uneasiness and discomfort. After a man has been married for some time he usually loses this feeling, as he learns to gauge the full meaning and value of these feminine outbursts more accurately, but to an ignorant bachelor they are often a source

A Passing Fancy

of considerable distress and disturbance of mind. Hatton was very much upset ; he knelt down by Delia's side and tried in his awkward way to comfort her.

‘My dear child, pray, pray don't give way like this! What is it? What has happened to make you cry so fearfully? Please don't, my dear girl,’ and in his distress he laid his hand on her shoulder and realised that she was indeed wet through.

Immediately the practical side of the matter suggested itself to him ; he drew off the wet jacket and pulled the dripping hat from her dishevelled hair. During these operations the partial glimpses he obtained of her face presented it to him as still convulsed with grief.

‘You will simply catch your death of cold!’ he exclaimed ; and striking a match he set light to the fire that was ready laid in the grate. Then he unlocked a small, hanging cupboard near the fireplace, and took out of it a glass and a decanter, and poured her out some sherry, which, with some little difficulty, he induced her to swallow. She rubbed her handkerchief over her face and looked up, and he noticed that her eyes were as lovely as ever, neither was her little, white nose

In Storm and Crisis

reddened in the least by the violence of her grief. Lorry remembered to have read in some novel of a lady whose tears did but enhance her beauty, instead of blurring and blotching it, as is the case when ordinary mortals—say, the housemaid, or one's elderly unmarried sisters and aunts—take it into their heads to cry. Delia was evidently one of those fortunate women who are no less beautiful in their grief than in their joy.

And her feet were wet, too, he presently discovered. It did not take him long to unbutton her boots and take them off, and soon he was holding them up one by one to the fast warming glow of the fire. Delia honestly did her best to prevent this last performance, being well aware that her foot was not her strongest point. But Lorry did not notice, fortunately for her, whether her boots were small or large; he was in a beatific condition of affectionate sympathy.

Then at last the sobs and tears subsided altogether and Delia began to explain herself.

'I am so dreadfully unhappy,' she faltered, 'and you know I have no one on earth belonging to me to go to. My parents are on the other side of the world; the only friends I have in England are abroad. I have no one—'

A Passing Fancy

no one!' She began to cry again a little, but Lorry took her hand and stroked it.

'Poor little girl! What is it? What can I do for you?'

'Ah, I suppose I oughtn't to have come here at all; it's very wrong, perhaps?'

'Oh, no, not wrong, surely!'

'But you see you have been so good to me, and I—I wanted you so dreadfully! And so I thought I would come in the boat. I was afraid to walk by the road and go to the front door; I was afraid your housekeeper would be shocked and not let me come in to see you—and I didn't want her to see me—'

'She shall not see you, Delia, but why did you want so much to see me? Could you not tell your trouble to Mrs Doyne? or to Bernard when next he comes?'

'No, that is just it!—I cannot! Oh, Mr Hatton!'—and she lifted two lovely, pathetic blue eyes that seemed heavy still with tears—'save me from Bernard, save me from him!'

'Save you—from *Bernard*!' he repeated wonderingly.

'Yes—I cannot marry him! I cannot!'

'But—but surely, my dear child, your engagement is barely a fortnight old, and I under-

In Storm and Crisis

stood that you loved him? You cannot have changed so quickly!’

‘I *never* loved him!’ she cried passionately, ‘never! I fancied I did just for a day or two, but I have found out my mistake now—since I have been here—since—since—’ Her voice faltered and broke, her eyes fell, she turned away her downcast face.

The blood seemed suddenly to go to Lorry’s head. He was still kneeling by her chair, drying the boots by the fire. He dropped them suddenly now into the fender and turned back to the little figure behind him.

‘Since when, Delia? since when?’ Then his arm stole round her waist, he drew her gently towards him. ‘Tell me what you mean, dear,’ he whispered into her ear.

It was evening—and they were alone—and she was young and very fair. The contact of her slender form vibrated through his pulses, there was a subtle charm in the fragrance of her damp, silky hair, and as it brushed lightly against his cheek a thrill of delight swept through him. Moreover, the flattery of her half-spoken confession had gone like new wine to his head.

Half yielding, half resisting, she allowed him to draw her closer—closer—till the words of

A Passing Fancy

her answer were spoken with her lips against his neck.

‘ Since I have known *you* ! ’ she murmured.

The room seemed to go round—a chaotic sense of unreality fell upon him. For a moment he was incapable of words, this thing was so unexpected, and so magical.

‘ You love me then ? ’ he asked at last, and his voice was a little rough and unlike itself.

‘ Yes, I love you, ’ she replied, with a breathless sigh of content.

For a long moment there was utter silence. It was Delia who broke it ; struggling out of his arms, she pushed him away from her.

‘ Oh, what must you think of me ! ’ she cried. ‘ How you must despise me ! How bold and brazen I must seem to you. Oh, please let me go—let me go ! ’

But he only took her back gently into the shelter of his arms, and laughed a little.

‘ No, of course I shall not let you go, child ; and I don’t think any of these dreadful things about you. Why should I ? No woman has ever loved me in my life, dear, and I am very grateful to you—grateful and glad. Will you marry me, little woman ? Will you be my wife ? ’

In Storm and Crisis

She lifted her face to his in mute assent, and he kissed her on the lips.

After that came the first little chill of reaction. He looked into the fire and wondered what on earth he should do now. The next thing he said, was that he must take her back to Meadowlands. But at this Delia fairly revolted. Nothing, she told him, nothing on earth should induce her to return there! She would write to Mrs Doyne if he liked, but she would never go back to her. She could not face her after her treachery to Bernard—and there was Bernard himself, too, who would be there to-morrow. No, she would far rather die. If he liked, she would go and throw herself into the river and be drowned—that perhaps would be the best thing for him—for everybody! and at that she began to cry again. Lorry was obliged to console and soothe her. Nevertheless, he was confronted by the practical difficulties of the case. And already the penalty of his precipitation began to make itself felt. If she would not go back, what in the world was he to do with her?

‘My dear girl,’ he remonstrated, ‘you must be reasonable. What else can be done? Don’t you see that you cannot possibly stay here? Where are you to go?’

A Passing Fancy

‘I don’t know! I don’t care! I will go anywhere you tell me—anywhere but back to Meadowlands.’

‘But how are you to manage? There are your things. You have not even a dry pair of stockings with you.’

‘Oh, yes, I have; I brought my dressing-bag; it is there in the corner,’ she replied promptly. ‘And I packed all my boxes up and left them in my room, ready to be sent after me.’

For a moment Hatton was taken aback. The perfect *sang-froid* of these careful preparations seemed a little difficult to reconcile with the abandon of the reckless and unhappy girl who had come, on the impulse of the moment, to implore his help, and to fling herself upon his protection.

Whilst he walked up and down the room in dire perplexity, Delia watched him furtively. Was he going to back out of it? she wondered. But Hatton had no intention of backing out. He had committed himself irrevocably, and no thought of not keeping his word to her crossed his mind. In a moment of passion he had asked her to be his wife, but there was no shadow of doubt concerning the obligations he had incurred by doing so; he had no intention of shirking

In Storm and Crisis

them, and in some ways, too, he told himself that he was glad—glad that the long battle of his life was over, and that this entirely unexpected side issue had taken his destiny out of his own hands.

The only puzzle was, what to do at the moment. All at once, as he paced the floor backwards and forwards, whilst Delia sat and watched him anxiously, a brilliant idea struck him.

He would send her to Lady Drumsel! He could order the brougham himself by going round to the stables through the window, and in the same way Delia could be got out of the house, and never a woman-servant in it, from Mrs Makin downwards, need be aware of her visit. It only needed a telegram, so that his aunt should have due warning of her arrival, and a letter for Delia to take herself to the old lady, explaining the dilemma. It was all as simple as possible.

The idea was a positive inspiration!

CHAPTER XII

STOLEN GOODS

THE morning sunshine came streaming through the wide open windows into the breakfast-room. After the storm of last night the air was fresh and sweet, and redolent with a thousand summer sounds and scents.

The sunlight glittered and played upon the silver dishes and the blue-and-white china on the table; a bumble bee was making a leisurely tour of inspection backwards and forwards between the bowl of roses in the centre and the strawberry jam in the oval glass dish at the side, whilst the silver kettle sputtered and steamed pleasantly over its spirit lamp.

Mrs Doyne, fresh as the morning, in a cool cotton dress, found the room empty when she came in to it.

A heap of letters lay upon her plate, and one on Delia's, in Bernard's handwriting.

Stolen Goods

Ambrosia took up her letters and opened and read them. They were of scanty interest, although they occupied her for some five or six minutes.

Then she glanced at the clock, waited a moment or two longer, then, as her guest did not appear, sat down to the table and poured out her own tea. Delia would be down presently, no doubt. But when, after nearly a quarter of an hour, she had almost finished her breakfast, and still Delia had not put in an appearance, a little annoyance crept into her mind. Mrs Doyne disliked unpunctuality. She rang the bell.

‘Ask Ann to go up to Miss Goddard’s room and see if she is coming down. I think she must have overslept herself,’ she said to Sims.

A few moments elapsed, then the door opened, and instead of the butler, Ann, the ancient housemaid, came in. There was something uncomfortable in her face of solemn mystery.

‘If you please, ma’am, Miss Goddard’s door is locked, and I’ve knocked and knocked and can’t get her to answer, and I don’t hear a sound in the room.’

‘She must be asleep. Go up and hammer

A Passing Fancy

at the door again. Of course she is asleep. Wasn't she called?'

'Yes; Mary says she went up to her room as usual at eight o'clock, but finding the door locked, she went away and set her hot water down outside the room; and perhaps I ought to tell you, ma'am, Mary says that the door was also locked last night when she went to tidy up the room in the evening.'

'Tiresome girl! why does she lock her door? Go up again, Ann, and shout at her through the keyhole.'

Ann went. But after a moment Mrs Doyne followed her as far as the hall, a small sense of uneasiness having somehow crept into her own mind. She stood at the bottom of the staircase and listened. There seemed to be several maids outside Miss Goddard's door, and the knocking and calling was going on vigorously. Presently one of them cried out,—

'Why! here is the door-key under the mat. My! how queer!'

By the time Ambrosia had flown up the staircase the door had been opened, and she followed the servants into the room.

It was empty, and was in a state of wild untidiness. The bed had not been slept in;

Stolen Goods

but Miss Goddard's two large boxes stood in the middle of the room; they were locked, and the empty wardrobe and drawers testified sufficiently that they were full of her belongings.

Ambrosia experienced a moment of utter consternation. She hunted anxiously all over the dressing and writing-tables for some written explanation of this extraordinary disappearance, but nothing of the kind was to be found.

'Miss Goddard must have had bad news by the evening post last night, and have gone back to London,' she said as unconcernedly as she could, with that intuitive instinct of making the best story possible before the servants which comes naturally to the mistress of a house. 'It was careless of her to leave no message or letter for me, but no doubt I shall hear—and probably she was too much agitated by some family news to think of anything else.'

'Miss Goddard have taken her dressing-bag with her, ma'am,' here remarked the under-housemaid, who had been peering about into the corners of the vacated bedroom, 'leastways I can't see it anywhere.'

'Then it shows that she took sufficient with her for the night,' answered her mistress, coolly.

A Passing Fancy

‘I daresay she will send for her boxes ; they had better be taken downstairs.’

And with ‘her head very high and an assumption of perfect tranquillity which she was very far from experiencing, Mrs Doyne turned to leave the room.

Outside on the landing she met the footman bearing a letter on a tray.

Lorry’s handwriting ! She tore the envelope open, saying at the same time, ‘Is the messenger waiting?’ and a glad flash of consolation went through her heart.

At least—in this most inexplicable dilemma—she had Lorry to turn to ! Lorry was always so ready to help her, and he would be sure to know what was the best thing to do ! Perhaps even this note of his would throw some light on Delia’s movements.

The footman remarked that the messenger had said there was ‘no answer,’ and had gone away.

‘Then run after him this moment and stop him!’ she cried, unfolding the letter. ‘Go as quick as you can, James.’

But before the man had reached the hall below, his mistress had rescinded the order.

‘No, never mind!’ she called out over the banisters, ‘there is no answer.’

Stolen Goods

Then she turned into her own bedroom close by, and shut to the door behind her.

For some moments she stood perfectly still in the middle of the room, facing the windows, and her eyes remained vacantly fixed upon the familiar landscape without. There lay the broad meadows, yellow with buttercups, the big elm trees, whose topmost boughs swayed gently in the morning breeze, the silver river rippling between the willows and the rushes of the bank, and far away the tender blues and greens of the distant woods that melted away into the pure tints of the summer sky. The warm, pulsating air was full of life and movement. Yellow butterflies chased each other across the lawn, brown-coated bees hovered above the flowers; there was a song of birds in the air: the cawing of rooks from the elm tops, the throbbing note of a thrush, the mellow undertone of the linnet, and nearer still the subdued chatter of the swallows who had made their nests under the broad eaves of the house.

How lovely in its summer beauty was this home of hers, that was so interwoven with every event of Ambrosia's life that it seemed to make the very setting and groundwork of her whole existence!

A Passing Fancy

But from henceforward, with what eyes was she to look upon it? and how would all these familiar sights and sounds seem to her, since all the beauty and the sweetness of them would be drenched out of them for ever?

‘Without Lorry—for ever!’ she said slowly at last. But although she spoke the words aloud, they seemed to convey no meaning to her.

Her mind was darkness—her heart seemed numb; there was the bewilderment of chaos within her—a hideous blank of nothingness!

For long moments she stood quite still, conscious of no pain, stupefied into insensibility, mentally paralysed as it were by the blow.

Now and again a few half-articulate words broke audibly from her lips.

‘I have lost him,’ she said once, but dully, stupidly, with no accent of grief or despair in her voice. Then again, after a long pause, with a small, joyless laugh, ‘How very little it hurts after all!’

Presently, with a shiver, she moved a little, and the paper she still held crackled in her closed fingers. The faint sound seemed to awaken her out of her stupor.

She smoothed out the note and began to read it through once more.

Stolen Goods

She had a considerable physical difficulty in doing this, because a sort of blindness seemed to have fallen upon her, so that she could scarcely distinguish the written words—they seemed to be misty, and the characters danced weirdly before her eyes.

‘DEAR AMBROSIA,—You will be glad to hear as soon as possible that Miss Goddard is quite safe. I am afraid her disappearance must have caused you some moments of anxiety, but I trust that this letter may reach you in time to make those moments of very brief duration. Miss Goddard went yesterday to stay with my aunt, Lady Drumsel, at Adchester. The reason she gives for having left your house so unceremoniously is, that she wishes to break off her engagement to Bernard, and was naturally reluctant to meet him to-day at Meadowlands. She will probably write to him herself.

‘Meanwhile, my dear old friend, I must not lose another moment in telling you something which may come somewhat as a surprise to you. Miss Goddard has promised to become my wife. I will not enlarge on this theme, nor enter into the reasons which have caused me to take this important step. Suffice it to say that marriage, as you know, and have often

A Passing Fancy

yourself pointed out to me, is at my age and in my position almost a duty. And although I am very much older than the young lady who has honoured me with her affection, I still earnestly hope that I may be able to make her happy. We are going to be married at once, very quietly, from my aunt's house. Delia, as you know, is very friendless in England, and the sooner she has a home and a protector the better it will be for her happiness. We shall probably be married next week, and I am just starting for Adchester to make the necessary arrangements, and to see my little girl. I shall very likely remain at Adchester, at the Castle Inn, till my marriage, where please, dear Ambrosia, write a line of 'good wishes to your always sincere old friend.—

‘LORRY.

‘*P.S.*—Will you kindly send on Delia's luggage to Lady Drumsel's?’

So that was the end of it all! of the long years of faithful devotion, of the love that she had believed to be so unswerving, of the constancy that she had thought to be as unchangeable as the hills!

What were they worth now, that love and

Stolen Goods

that constancy? Wrested away from her in little more than one short week by a child; a brainless, empty-hearted child, whose light fancy was stirred by every puff of wind—whose transient affections seemed to be at the disposal of every new comer! Could it be indeed possible that such a one as Delia Goddard could content the heart of Lawrence Hatton?

Yet not at first did Ambrosia's mind dwell overmuch on Delia and her merits and failings. For the first few hours, the anguish of her own loss was absolutely all that she had the power to see and to grapple with. All too soon that first numb blank of stupefaction had been awakened into the full realisation of what Lorry's desertion meant to her, and the force of it burst like an overwhelming flood over her heart. It was so inconceivable that he should have left her—so maddeningly incomprehensible! And then a very storm of bitterest self-reproach swept over her. Why had she valued that faithful lover so little? Why had she repulsed him so often and so coldly? Why had her foolish perversity led her to do violence to her own heart by the repetition of a senseless 'No'—which she had never honestly meant—to his oft-reiterated pleadings? She knew now—now that it was too late, and that she had lost him—that the long years had

A Passing Fancy

worked a complete revolution in her, and that she had in very truth loved him truly and dearly, and that the devotion she had seemed to prize so lightly had been, for a long time back, the very mainspring of her whole existence. But she had said 'No' once too often. She saw this plainly now. And so this girl, this child—this stranger that chance had dropped into their life—had stepped into the vacant breach and had stolen from her that good thing which she had over-confidently believed to be entirely and wholly her own!

But agonising as were her thoughts, and keen as was her self-reproach, Ambrosia Doyne was too self-restrained a woman to allow the world to perceive what she suffered, even during those first and darkest hours of that first day of her fatal despair—a day to which she often looked back, as the blackest of her whole life.

Not long did she permit herself the relief of the seclusion of her own room. She roused herself after a very short time, and after locking up Lorry's letter in her dressing-case, went downstairs and resumed her daily life. The servants were not aware of any outward change in her. Mechanically she gave the orders concerning Miss Goddard's trunks. The cart was

Stolen Goods

to take them to the station, and they were to be forwarded to Adchester.

‘Miss Goddard has rather unexpectedly gone to pay a visit to Lady Drumsel,’ was the brief explanation she gave to Sims and to Ann of her guest’s mysterious disappearance. She never said any more than that about it. She wrote out the labels for the boxes in a clear and steady hand, and saw that they were taken away in good time for the next train.

Very soon afterwards she was in the greenhouse giving some trifling directions to the gardener, and presently, in a shady straw hat and gardening gloves, she was snipping off the dead blossoms in the rose garden. All this time she had not shed a single tear—indeed, from first to last, Ambrosia was never seen by anyone to give way to the faintest exhibition of emotion; although possibly those long sleepless nights of despair, which for many long weeks were her subsequent portion, might have told another story. But to the world she ever presented a quiet and unruffled aspect. No one should ever be able to say of her that she was eating her heart out, or weeping her eyes dim out of despair, because Lawrence Hatton had deserted her! And, as a matter-of-fact, it was very generally supposed,

A Passing Fancy

from her manner of taking the event, that she had never cared in the least about him, and was quite indifferent to his marriage.

But now, on this particular day—this blackest day of Ambrosia's life—there was something else that she had to reckon with.

There was Bernard. So absorbing had been her own despair that, at first, Ambrosia had altogether forgotten Bernard. A telegram from him, announcing the time of his arrival, was the first reminder that came to her of the painful task that still lay before her. Bernard would have to be told. For it was manifestly impossible that he could have already heard from Delia herself.

For the first time for many years Ambrosia's heart went out in warm sympathy to her son. His sorrow seemed to find an echo in her own heart, and she dreaded the effect which the news of Delia's treachery might have upon him.

Grief and sorrow she was prepared for, but she had scarcely imagined the precise form which Bernard's agitation would take; had she done so, she would have shrank still more from the ordeal which she was compelled to undergo.

When he arrived at the house, Bernard

Stolen Goods

was requested to go upstairs at once to his mother's boudoir. Chafing a little at the order, he went nevertheless.

He supposed it was money—some horrid complication of business which might retard his marriage or diminish his allowance.

His temper was not angelic, even when he went into the room.

His mother rose to meet him. It was an unusual incident that she put her arms about his neck and kissed him fondly.

'My dear Bernard,' she said, 'my poor, dear boy,' and then he guessed that she had bad news for him.

She told him in half a dozen words. Delia had gone. She wished to break her engagement to him. She was going to marry Laurence Hatton. In less time than it has taken to write he was in possession of the facts.

For the first moment—as she had been—he appeared to be stunned. He shook himself free from his mother's arms and walked to the window.

Ambrosia respected his grief. The tears that had not risen at her own sorrow came welling up into her eyes as she watched him.

They were soon dried. Bernard turned

A Passing Fancy

round upon her fiercely, and for the next few minutes Mrs Doyne realised, for the first time, that she had hitherto been totally unaware of the strength and fury of the epithets that lie within the scope of the English language.

It was some moments before she became fully awake to the fact that it was against Laurence Hatton that this storm of violent words was levelled.

‘The hound! the blackguard! the cursed devil!’ foamed Bernard, and then there fell from his lips an avalanche of oaths so terrible and so appalling that Ambrosia, who was not easily scared, was positively terrified.

The woman who loved could not be silent under this violence of vituperation.

‘Bernard! Bernard!’ she cried, ‘what are you saying? Why do you use this terrible language about Mr Hatton? Cannot you see that it is Delia who is worthless and treacherous? Is it not as plain as daylight that it is she who went and threw herself upon his protection and compelled him to stand by her, though, true gentleman as he is, he does not cast a single slur upon her? It is Delia whom you should curse. Be a man and forget her—she is unworthy of you.’

But Bernard would not see it in this light.

Stolen Goods

‘ He has taken her from me,’ he cried furiously.
‘ He always hated me, and now he has destroyed my life ; but as there is a God above us, I will pay him back ten-fold for the injury he has done me this day. May he be cursed in hell for ever and ever !’

CHAPTER XIII

MARRIED IN HASTE

MR AND MRS LAURENCE HATTON, immediately after their marriage in Adchester Parish Church, went abroad for an indefinite period. The wedding was, in the bride's opinion at least, so exceedingly quiet as to be hardly worth being called a wedding at all.

There was nobody present but old Lady Drumsel, who gave the bride away, and a subaltern quartered at the Depot Barracks, who being slightly acquainted with the bridegroom, and having nothing whatever to do on that particular morning, had consented to act as best man.

After the ceremony, these four people drove back to Lady Drumsel's house together in her ancient yellow chariot. A very light luncheon awaited them, and when the subaltern had duly drunk to the health of the happy pair in a glass of excellent old Madeira, which was the only wine upon the table, he took his departure

Married in Haste

almost immediately, glad, no doubt, to get away from such a depressing and joyless bridal.

After he had gone, Delia went upstairs and changed her white muslin gown for a travelling dress, and then the chariot, which had been kept waiting at the door, conveyed them all three down to the station, where Mr and Mrs Hatton took train for London, *en route* for Folkestone, Paris and the Pyrenees, and so onwards to a more lengthened foreign tour. Lady Drumsel saw them off. She kissed them both affectionately, and stood waving her hand to them on the platform as long as they were in sight.

After which she went quietly home by herself in the chariot.

It would be idle to pretend that Lady Drumsel, albeit the most charitable and lenient-minded of women, had any very pleasurable or satisfactory thoughts concerning the event that had just taken place. She had, it is true, often and often urged her nephew to marry. Only quite lately, as has been seen, she had done her best to counsel him to do so; and she had furthermore recommended him to take as a wife, not a widow with a grown-up son, but some fresh young girl, whose brief

A Passing Fancy

career could contain no records of a sad or stormy past, and who might confidently be expected to give into her husband's keeping that fair, unwritten page upon which your average English married man not unnaturally desires to inscribe the first and opening paragraph.

Well, Lorry had done exactly as she had advised. He had turned his back upon the beautiful but undesirable widow after whom he had so long unprofitably hankered, and he had chosen for his bride a girl who was certainly young enough and fair enough to warrant every hope of a corresponding freshness and innocence of heart.

But all earthly things are, doubtless, vanity, and in this world nothing turns out so entirely perfect as it seems in anticipation ; and so Lady Drumsel was scarcely so happy about her great-nephew's marriage as she had hoped to be. Indeed, she caught herself wishing more than once that, after all, he had married Ambrosia Doyne instead.

At least, Ambrosia had been known to them all from her cradle upwards. There had been no mysteries or bewilderments about her life. Whereas this girl—what was she? Who were her friends and people? Or, had she any

Married in Haste

friends and people at all? And why, above all, had there been this unseemly haste about her marriage?

Ever since she had been aroused from her after-dinner nap, ten days ago, by a telegram announcing the immediate arrival of a young lady whom she had never heard of before, and whom her nephew requested her to receive and to befriend, Lady Drumsel's mind had been in a chronic condition of bewilderment concerning Delia Goddard. The telegram and its disturbing information had been followed within a couple of hours by the arrival of her nephew's brougham with Miss Goddard inside, and Miss Goddard had been the bearer of a letter which purported to tell her 'all about it.' But Lady Drumsel felt that she had never really known anything at all about it. For why, if Miss Goddard had been engaged to Bernard Doyne, had she now suddenly become engaged to Lorry? Why, too, had she left Ambrosia's house in such haste, and at such an unseemly hour of the evening? and in Lorry's carriage, too? That was the detail which chiefly obtruded itself in an objectionable fashion into the old lady's well-regulated and orderly mind.

Nevertheless, because she loved her nephew,

A Passing Fancy

and desired his happiness, and also because she was, as I have said, one of the sweetest and most charitable old ladies in the world, she did her best to shake off these prejudices and misgivings.

Things, she very well knew, were not at all the same as when she was young. The world had marched on rapidly, and was apparently none the worse for it. The girls were freer, less hedged about by the proprieties and conventionalities of an earlier generation ; all sorts of things might be done at the end of the nineteenth century which would never have been tolerated or even dreamt of at the beginning of it.

Lady Drumsel made up her mind not to allow herself to be hampered by the memories of her own youth and courtship, but to receive her future great-niece in the kindest and most indulgent manner possible. It was evidently a little romance of true love, the dear old lady tried to believe, and she must not expect to be let into all the secrets of these impetuous young lovers.

And Delia was so young and fair, that Lady Drumsel would have had no difficulty at all in loving her had it been possible to do so. But that was exactly where the trouble

Married in Haste

lay. She could not love her, do what she would. Not that Delia was openly antagonistic or disagreeable to her; far from it. Miss Goddard was on her very best behaviour. She was a little bit impressed by the title to begin with; the fact of her future husband's aunt being the widow of a lord was distinctly gratifying to her little, underbred soul, and she addressed her as 'my lady' with great effusion and frequency, until her hostess told her not to do so, but to call her Aunt Drumsel or Aunt Mary, as did all the rest of her nephews and nieces. But, for all Delia's pretty behaviour, Lady Drumsel could not understand her. She invited her confidence in vain. She spoke of Lorry and of his goodness with warmth and enthusiasm, but Delia did not respond; and her fondest eulogies of her nephew elicited no evidence of the slightest sympathetic acquiescence from his bride-elect. It went through the old lady's mind to wonder whether the girl cared about him in the least; and, like everybody else who puzzled their heads over Delia, she finally had doubts as to whether she possessed the vestige of a heart.

The eve of the wedding, indeed, she caught the girl in tears, and with an impulsive movement of mingled compassion and remorse for

A Passing Fancy

having, as she supposed, misjudged her, she threw her arms about her and drew her to her heart.

‘My dear, dear child! what is it?’ she cried sympathetically. ‘Are you unhappy, my dear? Why are you crying?’ Those tears, which were really genuine—for she saw them glittering on the girl’s cheek—filled her brimful of pity and yearning.

‘Oh—it’s—so d—dread—ful to be m—married like this!’ sobbed Delia, with her fair head on the old lady’s shoulder.

‘Poor little Delia! You are thinking about your mother, I am sure. How you must want her! and your father, too. And how you must wish all your young brothers and sisters were with you! My dear! it is indeed sad and lonely for you to be without them all at such a time! Will you let me take your mother’s place, dear?—as far as I can, that is to say; for no one, of course, can really replace your own mother at such a time.’

‘Oh, it’s not that,’ and Delia dashed away her tears. ‘I don’t know that mamma could do any good if she were here. She always hoped I should get married in England, and of course I know she couldn’t possibly be at my wedding. Oh, no, it’s not that.’

Married in Haste

‘Well, what is it, then?’

‘Oh, it feels so wretched not to have a proper dress to be married in, and no bridesmaids, and no party like every other bride! I had always looked forward so much to my wedding-day. Why should I be so unlucky as to be married in this way? It seems so hard.’

Lady Drumsel had withdrawn her motherly arms from about Miss Goddard’s neck long before the end of this speech.

‘I am also at a loss to know why!’ she replied rather coldly. ‘I agree with you that this marriage seems to have been arranged very much—too much—in a hurry. I can hardly understand how you can, either of you, be sure of your own minds. But as to the marriage itself, it appears to be Lorry’s wish that it should take place at once. He seemed to think—’

‘Oh, yes, it’s all Lorry’s doing, of course!’ she broke in wearily. ‘How could any girl in her senses want to be married without a trousseau and without a proper wedding-party?’

After that Lady Drumsel did not think it necessary to proffer her sympathy and consolation again to the afflicted bride, and she began to realise that it might be an impossi-

A Passing Fancy

bility to love Delia. There were no more confidential conversations between the old woman and the young one.

Nevertheless, Lady Drumsel missed not only her nephew, but Delia also, after the two had gone away. The old house, that had wakened up into unwonted life and activity during the brief ten days of Miss Goddard's visit, very quickly fell back into its old grooves of stagnation and tranquillity.

Lady Drumsel thought about her nephew constantly and anxiously.

The few hasty lines, scribbled on a post-card to announce their safe arrival at Paris, told her nothing—nothing at least of all that she wanted to know. What she wanted to know was, whether Lorry was happy with his young wife? and whether she filled his heart with content? and whether this girl—whom he had known so short a time—was indeed to him 'the one woman on earth'—without whom a man's marriage is but an empty and miserable mockery.

A fortnight had now elapsed since the wedding, and one day, sitting alone with her knitting under the shade of the mulberry on the lawn, Lady Drumsel sighed and shook her grey head sadly.

Married in Haste

‘I fear! I fear!’ she murmured to herself. And with the fear there awoke then and there a great desire to learn more about this fair-haired girl than she had been able to discover during her brief sojourn under her roof. She remembered Ambrosia.

The following morning being fine, yet with a cool breeze that rendered it a good travelling day for horses, Lady Drumsel set out early, after her breakfast, on what was for her a very long drive indeed.

It was a good ten miles, door to door, from her house to Meadowlands, and it was now several years since she had attempted so long an expedition. She did not want to be in Mrs Doyne’s way, and so she determined to put up her carriage and horses at the inn in the village close by, and to walk from there to Meadowlands to pay her visit.

Ambrosia would give her lunch, no doubt, and Ambrosia would tell her—she scarcely knew what—but doubtless much of what she wanted to know. If she had not loved Lorry—and from her having so persistently refused to marry him, it was certainly to be inferred that she had not loved him—she, at anyrate, must have, in virtue of her long-standing friendship, a very sincere regard for him, and

A Passing Fancy

doubtless she had his welfare at heart. Lady Drumsel felt that she could talk over Lorry's marriage with Ambrosia as she could with no one else on earth. And being a true woman—albeit an aged one—Lady Drumsel was full of that essentially feminine craving—‘to talk things over’ with a sympathetic woman, to whom she felt she could open her heart.

A disappointment awaited her. The house, when she reached it, looked desolate and deserted. The blinds in the upper windows were down, there were no flowers in the window-boxes, no muslin curtains before the ominously-closed windows. It was a long time before anybody came to answer her bell, and when at last the door was opened, it was done so with a sound as of the drawing back of bolts and of bars; and instead of Sim's sleek and respectable countenance in the doorway, a young maidservant, rather untidy as to hair and garments, and dirty as to face, stood before her on the threshold.

‘Is not Mrs Doyne at home?’

‘No, ma'am; Mrs Doyne has gone away,’ replied the damsel.

Lady Drumsel looked her surprise.

‘Where has she gone? Will she be away long?’ she asked.

Married in Haste

‘She has taken a furnished house in London. Would you like to have her address?’

Lady Drumsel said she would, and the girl went back into the house to get it. Lady Drumsel remained standing at the door. She was rather thoughtful.

Suddenly her quick eyes caught a glimpse of the tall figure of a man in the shrubbery to the right. The man apparently saw her, for he stopped, and was turning away hurriedly to avoid an encounter, when Lady Drumsel called out sharply,—

‘Bernard! is that you? Come here, please, and speak to me.’

Under his breath Bernard anathematised ‘old Drumsticks’ as he called her—but as he had been caught, he was obliged to come forward, and he did so awkwardly and a little sulkily.

‘Come and tell me the meaning of this,’ said the old lady, as she shook hands with him. ‘Your mother gone away?—taken a house in London? What on earth is the meaning of it?’

Bernard shrugged his shoulders and stuffed his hands down into his trouser pockets—an ugly trick which Lady Drumsel particularly disliked.

A Passing Fancy

‘How can I tell? Some fad, I suppose. She said she wanted a change.’

‘A change? Has she been ill?’

‘Not that I know of. She was out riding the day before she left, and she bicycled forty miles with the Storey girls the day before that, besides sculling up to the lock and back before breakfast. No, I shouldn’t say she was *ill*!’ and Bernard laughed rather disagreeably.

‘Your mother always has such indomitable energy,’ remarked Lady Drumsel. ‘What a wonderful woman she is!’

The maid came back to the door at this moment, with the address written on a slip of paper. ‘56 Hill Street. That is a nice part of London,’ said her ladyship, reading the address aloud; ‘but why did she want a change if she was so well?’

‘Really, I can’t say. I suppose she required gaiety, excitement, new clothes — dissipation generally. You women are none of you satisfied without a break out now and then,’ and again Bernard shrugged his shoulders.

What an odious young man he was, to be sure! That ‘you women’ offended the gentle, high-bred old lady bitterly. It was an impertinence as spoken to herself, without counting the disrespect implied towards his own mother.

Married in Haste

A sharp retort trembled on her lips, but suddenly, as she looked at him fully, she seemed to perceive all the underlying bitterness and misery in the half-averted, scowling face; she remembered that Delia had jilted him, and was sorry for him.

‘And you, Bernard,’ she said gently, ‘what are you doing down here? Am I to congratulate you?’

‘Congratulate me!’ he almost shouted, and for a moment he looked so savagely at her that Lady Drumsel stepped a little back from him in alarm.

‘I mean, have you passed your examination?’ she hastened to explain.

‘Oh! No, I was ploughed,’ he answered gruffly.

‘I am very sorry,’ she said kindly.

‘Oh, you needn’t be sorry—I am not. It doesn’t matter a d— a bit. I don’t care. I shall never do anything now. It’s all up with me,’ and the wild, angry eyes filled suddenly with boyish tears.

Lady Drumsel laid her gentle hand on his sleeve.

‘Poor boy! I understand. She treated you very badly, Bernard.’

He gave a short, angry laugh. ‘Oh, I don’t

A Passing Fancy

blame *her*, you know ; it wasn't her fault so much as that precious nephew of yours, Lady Drumst—sel ; he robbed me of her ! I shall never forgive him—never !'

Lady Drumsel felt incapable of making excuses for her nephew. This angry grief was so fierce and so evidently genuine, so impossible to console. Why had not Delia stuck to this youth ? She might have been the making of him, for, in his own way, he evidently loved her. But as for Lorry ! what use could she be to Lorry ? Was she not rather likely to be his undoing ?

Alas, how topsy-turvy is the world and its ways !

Presently she wished Bernard good-bye, and sent a message by him to his mother. He was only down at Meadowlands for the day, he told her. Oh, yes, of course he was staying with his mother in Hill Street—there was nowhere else for him to go.

'I am sorry for her too,' she remarked casually, as he walked down as far as the gate with Lady Drumsel.

'It's a bit rough on her, I expect, though it's all her own fault, so she don't deserve much pity. A woman at her time of life shouldn't have gone in for that sort of thing, and I

Married in Haste

always hated the idea. But it would have been better than this, anyhow — a million times better !’

He shook hands with her absently, with his thoughts evidently miles away, and turned abruptly round into the shrubbery, whilst Lady Drumsel walked slowly back to the inn.

Bernard’s enigmatical words absorbed her whole thinking capacities. There had been no coherence in that speech of his ; no apparent sense, objective or subjective ; scarcely, to the ordinary intelligence, any meaning whatever.

Yet Lady Drumsel thought she could understand it perfectly.

When she came to the turning of the road she stood still and looked back at the empty house, whose mistress had deserted it to go and enjoy herself up in London.

‘ So it seems that she did love him after all ! ’ said Lady Drumsel softly to herself, shaking her old head sadly.

CHAPTER XIV

DROWNING CARE

I HAVE an uneasy suspicion that there may be some of my readers who, having followed the fortunes of Ambrosia Doyne so far, will perhaps, at this juncture, be saying to themselves that Bernard was perfectly right; and that a woman old enough to be the mother of a marriageable son was all too old to want a lover.

Yet, apart from the fact which I have endeavoured to set forth, that Mrs Doyne was an entirely exceptionable woman, I believe that there will be found many persons who do not entirely flout the idea that Love is necessarily confined to the twenties, and can find no rest for his foot in the later and maturer decades of life.

To enlist sympathy for a heroine who is no longer young is, I am well aware, a task of almost superhuman magnitude. Yet it should not be outside the bounds of human possibility.

Drowning Care

For a book of fiction, after all, can have no better aim than to be the true presentment of life, such as it appears to ourselves when we look about us; and surely amongst the many hundreds of men and women who cross and recross the warp and woof of our own lives, we meet so many strange and complex stories, such unsuspected tragedies or serio-comedies, that it would be wonderful indeed if fiction were able to outstrip, or even to equal, reality.

And in all these histories that come under our own direct and personal notice, love, being of all human factors the greatest, plays naturally no inconsiderable part. I am convinced that, within the experience of most of us, there are many persons to whom we have seen love come late in life—to some even for the first time—whilst others again, after they have loved and lost and sorrowed, have plucked up heart and courage and have loved again, and that no less sincerely and deeply than in their earlier days.

Ambrosia, therefore, to whom the great love of her life, that had lain dormant perhaps for years, sprang into active being when she herself was past life's meridian, felt the grief of love's bitter failure no less deeply and intensely than if she had been a maiden in her teens.

A Passing Fancy

In point of fact, since, as we grow older, passions often strengthen, and affection strikes deeper root, it is highly probable that her suffering was proportionately greater than if she had been twenty.

At anyrate, the 'eternal feminine' being, for the most part, identically the same in all women, young or old, Ambrosia, in this dark hour, betook herself to the time-honoured methods common to her sex in order to stifle and to scotch the pain that consumed her. That is why Lady Drumsel, who knew a thing or two, had found her out.

Mrs Doyne wanted to drown care. Men do this by plunging into the coarser forms of dissipation. Women, according to their nature, endeavour to achieve the same end after a more refined fashion.

Mrs Doyne took her London house in Hill Street as a basis of operation. Then she set to work in serious earnest to cultivate gaiety.

There was not much difficulty about it. Given a woman handsome enough to attract, and energetic enough to enjoy, let her also be rich enough to entertain, and agreeable enough to be sought after, and all the rest of the business follows of itself.

It did not take Mrs Doyne very long to

Drowning Care

look up all her old London friends, and to form the acquaintance of a great many more new ones. By February, the commencement of the Parliamentary season, she was in the full swing and rush of society.

She entertained liberally, yet without ostentation. She understood to a nicety the art of bringing the right people together. Her dinners were noted. Her theatre-parties, followed by delightful little suppers in the small hours at the house in Hill Street, became a feature of the day, and invitations to them were eagerly coveted. Everything was always well done in her house; nothing was ever overdone, and her guests always enjoyed themselves.

Naturally she was asked out a great deal in return, and she was so much in request that it was difficult to secure her. Her handsome and well-dressed person, her unfailing good spirits and intelligent conversation, were felt to be an acquisition in every drawing-room she entered. She seemed to fling herself heart and soul into every passing pleasure. She was never alone; morning, noon and night she was on the go, every waking hour was filled up with engagements; and in this manner, when at last she shut her bedroom door upon

A Passing Fancy

herself, she was usually so physically exhausted and worn out, that often she would fling herself, still half dressed, upon her bed, and fall at once into the dead, dreamless slumber of a tired dog. That indeed was her one and sole object—the be-all and end-all of this life of racket, which was really as uncongenial as it was new to her. That she might sleep—sleep and not dream! That was all she craved for now upon earth; no time to think by day; no hours in which to remember by night. She had not forgotten that first month after Lorry's marriage. She would never forget it. It would go with her to her grave; those long summer days of empty misery, followed by long nights of sleepless anguish. Often, even now, a shuddering remembrance of that time would sweep over her in the midst of the gayest scene; at some brilliant ball where her perfect dancing was always sure to secure her as many partners as the youngest and fairest *débutante*; at a dinner, where she was the very life and soul of the conversation; in the park, at the opera, at the theatre. The black shadow of that first month would now and then come rushing back for a hideous moment across her soul, blotting out the world around her, like a great tidal wave that carries everything before it. She

Drowning Care

remembered how she had said to herself in those dreadful days, 'If I sit here and think, think, think, I shall go mad!' and how one day she had aroused herself and said,—

'I will not go mad. I will not succumb to this thing. It shall not conquer me. I will conquer it.'

And then she had gone straight up to town and taken the house in Hill Street.

And ever and ever, day and night, night and day, she had cried aloud to herself, 'I will forget—forget—forget!'

Those who were much in her society at this epoch of her life can remember that there was a subtle change in her from her earlier and quieter days. If she was possibly more brilliant and more attractive than ever in her gay abandon of manner, she was also, perhaps, a shade less lovable and sympathetic. She was a little hard in her judgments, a little cynical in her airy pronouncements. She used to say at this time that men were delightful creatures, but that it was best to take from them the pleasure of the moment, and to expect nothing more of them. And most people laughed, whilst here and there an older friend would wonder and regret.

It was always to Ambrosia herself a very

A Passing Fancy

amusing surprise, that during this period of her life she received two proposals of marriage.

The first was from an earl, an elderly widower with one young daughter. It would have been considered a very good match for her in the eyes of the world. The Earl of Granbridge was well off and well preserved; he had a mansion in town and a fine old castle in Scotland. He enumerated his advantages in the frankest manner to the handsome widow when he did her the honour to ask her to become his wife, and at the same time he made no secret of his motives. He told her, with a charming candour, that he did not, of course, pretend to be in love with her, his heart being naturally buried in the grave of his late wife. No doubt, he added, Mrs Doyne's heart also was similarly interred, but he respected and esteemed and admired her immensely, and should consider himself a fortunate man if she would accede to his request.

He went on to explain to her that he wanted a wife very badly. At Granbridge House in Manchester Square, as well as at the castle in the North, there was, apparently, chaos both upstairs and down. The servants were in

Drowning Care

constant revolt. The cooks, in a long succession, drank, pilfered and squandered their master's money; they did everything, apparently, save cook. The butlers and footmen were much in the same plight. The maidservants were for ever gadding. Then there was Lillian! Lillian was seventeen, and had driven every governess she had had away. She had actually and literally fought the latest, who declared she must leave at once. Poor Miss Prime's face bore the visible impress of her pupil's finger-nails. He had not an idea what to do about Lillian, she was quite unmanageable, and next year, too, she would have to come out!

Mrs Doyme suggested that an efficient chaperone and companion might be found for Lady Lillian, and a competent house-keeper engaged to keep the servants in order; his difficulties might probably be solved in that way.

The earl sat looking fixedly down into his hat. The poor man had no sense of humour! 'Thank you,' he said presently, with the utmost gravity, 'I will think over your advice; but—but are you quite sure that you will not reconsider your refusal? It would be, you know, such a simple way of settling every-

A Passing Fancy

thing, if you would only consent to become my wife?’

He looked up at her wistfully, and with no sort of conception of the humorous aspect he was unconsciously putting upon the case. He was somewhat inclined to be offended because at this juncture she laughed.

‘Surely, surely,’ he said, reddening a little, ‘there can be nothing to laugh at, in an offer of marriage on my part! I really fail to see anything ludicrous—’

‘Of course there is nothing ludicrous!’ she hastened to reply, ‘and I am quite sensible of the honour you are paying me, Lord Granbridge—only,’ and then she, too, became grave as a judge, ‘only, don’t you see—I cannot marry any man whom I do not love.’

‘Oh, I thought you and I were past all that sort of thing, Mrs Doyne.’

‘No,’ said Ambrosia, gently, ‘I am afraid I am not past it.’

After that the earl had nothing further to say, and so he went away. He was sorry, because he really liked Mrs Doyne, and believed that she would have managed his household and his refractory daughter admirably, but the incident did not dwell very long in his mind, and he bore no malice, for the next time he

Drowning Care

met her he told her that he had engaged a housekeeper, and also a companion for his daughter. He was quite as pleasant and conversational as though she had never refused to become his countess. He never alluded to the subject again.

Her next wooer was a man of a totally different kind. A young American, over in England for the first time—clever, garrulous, full of new ideas—some of them worth listening to, others somewhat preposterous. His quick speech and quaint expressions, his eager and breathless enthusiasms attracted Ambrosia's notice from the moment she became acquainted with him. He struck her as original, and as he had come to England furnished with letters of introduction to excellent houses, she felt no misgivings concerning his social status. He was not handsome, but his face was a strong one, with rugged outlines and eyes that seemed to scintillate with electric force. He fell desperately in love with Mrs Doyne, and pursued his wooing with a characteristically trans-Atlantic fervour. Flowers, books, bonbons, expensive trifles, came pouring into her hall every morning, and he himself stood upon her doorstep daily. When half laughingly, half angrily, she scolded him for

A Passing Fancy

this totally unaccustomed shower of gifts, and tried to make him take some of them back, he waved her remonstrances impatiently aside.

‘Throw them on the fire if you don’t want them,’ he said, ‘but you can’t prevent me presenting you more to-morrow!’

In a fortnight after their first meeting he went down on his knees in the centre of her drawing-room carpet, and with a torrent of impassioned words laid his heart and hand at her feet. She had some difficulty in making him arise from his lowly attitude; in fact, he swore by all his gods that he intended to remain there ‘forever’ unless she promised to marry him. Some visitors were announced. Mrs Doyne burst out laughing, and explained that she was getting up some charades, and that Mr Looner was rehearsing ‘a love scene.’ He floundered up to his feet somehow, and departed raging. And for the following week he wrote to her three letters daily, full of reproach and entreaty. She answered one or two of them, but his ardour at last became a nuisance to her, and having forbidden him to call, she ended by not answering his letters.

Eventually she heard incidentally that he was on the point of returning to America;

Drowning Care

and the fact was made patent to her when she received some rather clever verses full of stinging sarcasm concerning the wiles of English 'women of fashion,' which he posted to her on the eve of his departure, and which reached her when he was well on his way back to his own country.

These episodes served to amuse her to a certain extent, although she doubted afterwards whether they had not on the whole annoyed her more.

Meanwhile, she saw very little of Bernard. He lived in the house, it is true, but he very seldom dined there, and he was usually late for breakfast. Sometimes he lunched with her, but when he did, he scarcely spoke to her during the meal. He was morose and sulky, and ruder and more disrespectful to her than ever. She made excuses for him and tried to forgive him, for she believed that he suffered acutely, and she did her best now and then to say a few words of sympathy to him. But for the most part he received her advances with a scowling face, and, if the name of Hatton were mentioned, with an added curse.

Once she urged him to be a man; to face his trouble bravely and live it down, but a

A Passing Fancy

stolid silence and an averted face was his sole response to her well-meant advice.

Ambrosia had no idea how or where he spent his time. Since he had failed in his examinations, the Bar had become a closed career for him, and he would not listen to her when she suggested that he should seek for some employment.

She fancied he had come across some of his less desirable college acquaintances in London, and she feared that he was falling into evil ways. He stayed out very late at night; and once when she herself came back in the small hours from a ball to which he had refused to accompany her, she encountered him on the staircase decidedly the worse for drink. She shuddered as she passed him hurriedly by, and fastened herself into her bedroom. The sight of him brought vividly back to her a chapter of her dreadful past; for he reminded her of his father!

She was unfeignedly glad when, a day or two after this episode, he suddenly announced to her that he was going away on a lengthened cruise of several months on the yacht of a friend. The friend, Lord George Verey, was a young nobleman of somewhat dissipated appearance, but still she thought anything was better for

Drowning Care

Bernard than hanging about London doing nothing.

‘I shall want some more money,’ he announced with his usual crude discourtesy.

‘Why, I only paid you your allowance a fortnight ago,’ she demurred.

‘Well, I’ve spent it. One can’t live in town on nothing. I must have some more. You can’t pretend that you can’t afford it.’

She might have remarked that he had been living at her expense, but she rarely now opposed him in the matter of money. So she only inquired when he wanted it, and promised that he should have it in good time.

The yacht was bound for the Baltic and Norway, and Ambrosia was very glad when the time came for him to go. The house felt wholesomer and sweeter when that haunting shadow of evil had left it. She seemed to breathe more freely for his absence.

CHAPTER XV

MRS JOHNSON'S MIND IS RELIEVED

A FEW days after Bernard's departure, Ambrosia was dressing for her afternoon drive, which included a round of 'At Homes,' a charity bazaar and an amateur concert, when Ann entered her room, bearing a card on a silver tray.

'Sims said you was just going out driving, ma'am, but the lady begged him to ask if you would kindly just spare her a few moments before you start. He says he did not know how to refuse her, she seemed so anxious, and so he has shown her into the drawing-room.'

Ambrosia took up the card.

MRS JOHNSON,
Eccleston Square.

For a few moments she could not imagine who Mrs Johnson could be. She did not remember anyone of that name upon her visiting-list, and it was not until she was actually turning the

Mrs Johnson's Mind is relieved

handle of the drawing-room door that she suddenly recollected Delia's cousin, with whom she had been staying when she had come down to Meadowlands.

She knew all about her now, and braced herself up for a possibly disagreeable interview.

But Mrs Johnson had no intention of making herself disagreeable. She was standing in the middle of the room, with her back to the door, when Mrs Doyne came in. She turned round quickly, and Ambrosia saw a faded, dark-complexioned woman, who might once have been handsome, but whom ill health had prematurely aged. She was probably younger than Ambrosia, but looked ten years older. She was almost servilely apologetic.

'Oh, Mrs Doyne, I hope you will forgive my intrusion,' she said, holding out a limp hand to her hostess. 'It is *so* good of you to see me. I do hope it is not putting you to great inconvenience?'

'Oh, no, not at all. Won't you sit down?' Mrs Doyne drew forward a chair for her visitor, and sat down herself near her.

'You see, I did not know who to go to to get news of Delia; and then I heard that you were in London, and I thought I would venture to come to you. Of course, when one cannot

A Passing Fancy

reckon about letters, one doesn't know how to get news.'

'I think if you were to address your letters to the Grange they would certainly be forwarded to Mrs Hatton,' remarked Mrs Doyne, quietly.

'Well, but that is what I have done—over and over again. I must have written six or seven letters to her, and she has never answered one of them.'

'I am afraid Delia is not a very good correspondent,' said Ambrosia, smiling a little.

'Oh, no, I know she is not, but I do think she might write to *me*! I do so want to know how she is. You see, Mrs Doyne, she is my favourite cousin's child, and I can't help feeling myself responsible for her to her parents, as they sent her over to me. And I've had so many letters from Molly—that is my cousin, Mrs Goddard—begging me to tell them if Delia is happy, and what sort of a man she has married. Molly complains she has only heard once from her just to tell them she was married, and naturally the sudden change was a great surprise to them; and I can't answer her poor mother's questions at all, not knowing anything about this man myself, nor if she is happy with him.'

Mrs Johnson's Mind is relieved

‘And—you want me to tell you—if she is happy?’

‘Yes; if you only would, Mrs Doyne, it would be so kind of you. Oh, I know she doesn’t deserve that you should take any interest in her whatever, as she behaved so badly to poor Mr Doyne. Naturally all your sympathy must be with your son—such a good son I have always understood him to be, too.’

Mrs Doyne’s eyebrows went up just a little at this, and her lips compressed themselves.

‘And Delia, of course, treated the poor fellow shamefully. I daresay you quite hate the sound of her name. But I can’t help being fond of the child all the same, and I do so long to know if she has married a nice, kind man, who will make her a good husband.’

‘I think you may be quite satisfied on that score, Mrs Johnson. Mr Hatton is an old friend of mine, and I am quite sure he will make an excellent husband.’

‘Oh, I am so glad to hear you say that, Mrs Doyne! It is a great relief to my mind. You think that he is good enough for her, then?’

‘Quite,’ replied Ambrosia, emphatically.

Outwardly she was perfectly calm and self-possessed; no one could have guessed how

A Passing Fancy

these questions and surmises stirred up the hot, throbbing pulses of her heart.

Mrs Johnson naturally had not the faintest conception of the pain she was inflicting.

‘I am *so* glad,’ she said again. ‘Of course Delia was a very naughty girl to behave as she did; but you will forgive me, I am sure, dear Mrs Doyne, for saying that I had my misgivings from the first about her engagement to your son. I don’t think the dear child was at all sure of her own feelings. It was all settled in such a hurry, you know; and I don’t really believe she was in the least bit in love with him. And as I used to tell her, marriage without love is an awful thing, although *with* love it may be heaven. Ah, you and I know that, don’t we, dear Mrs Doyne? You, no doubt, were as happy in your marriage as I am. But as I was saying about Delia, she seemed always to take things so lightly. There was nothing serious about her, no sense of responsibility, no idea of anything beyond the gratification of the moment. But now I do hope she has settled down at last. She told her mother that Mr Hatton was a good deal her senior. I suppose she was very much in love with him?’

‘I really do not know.’ For the life of her,

Mrs Johnston's Mind is relieved

Mrs Doyne could not overcome the icy coldness with which she uttered those words.

But good Mrs Johnson was so full of her own enthusiasms and theories that she was not conscious of the frigidity of the reply.

'Oh, she *must* have been, I think, to have taken such an extremely strong and decided step. And you know, Mrs Doyne, *love* was just the one thing wanted to make Delia's character perfect. I always used to say that a marriage of love would be the making of her.'

Mrs Doyne preserved a discreet silence. There did not seem to be any adequate reply to be made to these outpourings, and she secretly wondered how, consistently with politeness, she could bring the interview to a close. Yet even at that moment Ambrosia was alive to the humour of the situation, and an inclination to laugh outright presented itself to her in the distinct light of a temptation.

Then Mrs Johnston said something else, and Ambrosia no longer felt inclined to laugh.

'You see, she was such a reckless girl. Some people might have called her a flirt—but I don't think she meant to flirt exactly, only just to amuse herself with anything that came uppermost, with no thought of the consequences. She was just a butterfly, a puff of

A Passing Fancy

thistledown! Did you know that she had been already engaged to be married three times before she accepted your son?’

‘Good Heavens!’ Mrs Doyne turned two startled eyes upon her visitor. ‘You cannot mean it! Three times! Why, she was only nineteen. Are you quite sure?’

‘Oh, yes; she told me all about it herself. She did not seem to think it anything extraordinary or unusual. Of course, I don’t believe she cared a scrap for any of these men, excepting just at first. She just got engaged to them for a whim, I suppose, and Delia tired of people very quickly. She got tired of poor Mr Doyne, I expect.’

‘That is not a very happy augury for her future, Mrs Johnson,’ remarked Ambrosia, gravely.

‘No, perhaps not,’ replied the lady, glibly, ‘but we all know what a transformation love can work in the heart, and I feel very much happier since you have told me what a good man Mr Hatton is and how fond they are of each other.’

Mrs Doyne had certainly never said anything of the kind, but as Mrs Johnson had at last risen to go, she allowed it to pass. ‘And I shall write and tell her mother what you

Mrs Johnston's Mind is relieved

have said to me. She has been very anxious about her, and I am sure she will be much easier in her mind now. A good husband, older than herself, who will influence and restrain her, is just exactly what Delia most wanted; and if she is truly in love with him, why, he will work wonders with her! Dear child! I do so hope she will be happy, and you will let me know if you hear from her, won't you, Mrs Doyne? and when they come back to England? I shall just run down for the day to see her in her new home when she returns; and I *am* so much obliged to you, Mrs Doyne! Thank you *so* much. You have taken a great load off my mind, I assure you. Good-bye, good-bye—and ever so many thanks!’

She was gone at last. If it had lasted much longer Ambrosia felt she must have put her out of the room by force. She felt stifled, and instinctively threw open the window when she was left alone.

She stood looking blankly out into the street for some moments after her visitor's hansom had driven away.

Her heart was beating still, not so much with agitation as with indignation.

Poor Lorry! poor Lorry!

What a prospect!—what a look-out for him!

A Passing Fancy

Much thought that tiresome, stupid, romantic woman had given to *him* ! What did it matter what Delia did, what Delia felt, what Delia's life would be, when the happiness of such a man as Laurence Hatton hung in the balance ? And what chance of happiness would he have with this feather-brained girl who 'got tired' of people so easily, and who had apparently engaged herself for a caprice to every man she had met ? Who was to say that Lorry would fare any better than the rest of them ?

Oh, why did he do it—why—why ? Did he love her ? or did he not ?

Ambrosia could not tell. At her heart of hearts she did not believe he did. Yet if not, a life of remorse and regret too probably lay before him ; whilst, if he did love her, an equal amount of pain and sorrow must surely be his portion !

As to Delia having fallen genuinely and honestly in love with Lorry, Ambrosia dismissed the notion with contempt. It was not in Delia to be seriously in love with anybody. She took life too lightly. She was a creature of whims and caprices, of moods and of contradictions, and as for heart—she had none !

Nevertheless, all these thoughts were purely

Mrs Johnston's Mind is relieved

conjectural. Ambrosia had certainly had one or two letters from her old friend since he married, but from these she had learned nothing. They were not at all like the letters he used to write to her. There was a formality about them, a tone of restraint which was perhaps scarcely to be wondered at under the circumstances. One reached her from Florence—another from Cairo—the latest were from Innsbruck and Vienna. The pictures, the churches, the scenery and the weather, usually filled three largely-written sides of the paper. He rarely mentioned Delia, save quite incidentally; and as to his inner life with her, he made no allusion to that whatever. He had never told Ambrosia whether he was happy in his married life. Yet that reticence might be due to the change in his relations towards herself; for very shame, perhaps, he could not have enlarged on that topic. Her replies insensibly moulded themselves upon his letters. They were very brief and exceedingly cold. She wrote of her new life in London society—a life in which he did not recognise her in the least—as though she were thoroughly enjoying herself, and Lorry sighed a little as he read. The names of countless fashionable people flitted through her letters. She had dined

A Passing Fancy

with so and so, gone to the opera or the play with others ; the ball at Lady Somebody's had been a brilliant affair ; Ascot had been quite delightful, some of the dresses in the enclosure most wonderful, etc., etc. Lorry wondered as he read what had become of the old Ambrosia. This fashionable lady in her vortex of gaiety did not seem to be at all the same person. He could not read the riddle as Lady Drumsel had done ; but then that was mainly because he was a man. And all said and done, a man is a very stupid animal ; unless a thing is put before him in black and white he very seldom sees it, and Lorry was not in the least clever at putting esoteric puzzles together.

Moreover, he had, poor man, his own particular puzzle at this time, and he had scarcely the leisure to attend to anybody else's.

CHAPTER XVI

REPENTING AT LEISURE

It is scarcely necessary to say that Hatton had not been married a week before he realised that he had made a gigantic mistake.

The first shock, which fell upon him with something of the force of a sledge-hammer, was the speedy discovery he made concerning the utter and crass ignorance of the girl who had become his wife. Delia was more hopelessly ill-educated than any average child of twelve in the village school of his native parish. It had indeed never entered into Lorry's mind to suppose that any nineteenth-century English-speaking young lady could be in such outer darkness of ignorance as was Delia. She had, as a matter of fact, never had any education at all. History was a blank page to her; her geography was purely elemental. She was not, for instance, sure whether Florence was north or south of Naples, or whether Milan was in France or in Germany. She was unacquainted

A Passing Fancy

with the veriest rudiments of poetry or art. She had never heard of Dante or of Vandyke, and she supposed that Raphael Sanzio must be 'one of those queer angels with lots of wings' mentioned in the Book of Revelations. She knew no language but her own, and the whole range of modern science and of modern politics was a dead letter to her. Neither had she any accomplishments. Although she could strum waltzes and polkas on the piano ; of good music, she knew absolutely nothing, and it did not even amuse her to listen to it. Her one and only accomplishment was dancing ; she danced divinely.

And, unfortunately, that was perhaps the only earthly subject about which Lorry cared and knew nothing whatever. He had never been a dancing man, and he was too old now to begin.

However, once he had fully grasped the portentous fact of this ignorance on the part of his bride, Lorry plucked up his courage with both hands and determined that he would not be daunted by it. He would educate her himself. Her youth was all in her favour ; her devotion to himself would no doubt make of her a docile and willing pupil. He told himself that he should really find a pleasure in opening

Repenting at Leisure.

her mind to the wisdom of the world and in cultivating her taste for the beautiful and the antique. He pictured her as drinking with eagerness from the cup of knowledge which it would be his privilege to hold out to her, and visions of her gradual expansion of mind and enlargement of soul under his tuition filled him with new hopes and a new interest in her. His opportunities he considered to be unrivalled. To open her eyes to the beauty of Art in that fair land of Italy which is the very home and cradle of the Art of the world ; to talk to her of the greatness of bygone peoples beneath the mighty shadows of the Sphinx and the Pyramids ; then to carry her onwards through enchanted Mediterranean Seas to the classical shores of Greece itself—all this, taken as an object-lesson to his own careful daily instructions—presented a most alluring prospect to his fancy. He told himself that the task of training and awakening into life the intelligence and the appreciative taste of his fair young girl-wife would certainly be the most fascinating and delightful of all conceivable occupations, for would he not mould her to his own views and ideas, and lead her by the hand to those Olympian heights where he and she might learn to wander together in a happy

A Passing Fancy

community of thought and opinion? The prospect seemed to give a fresh zest to life. He wrote to London for a boxful of standard books carefully selected for the object he had in view, and prepared to set to work energetically upon Delia's education.

But he soon found that he had taken everything too much for granted.

Just for the first day or two, indeed, Delia seemed to be rather amused by the idea of 'doing lessons,' as she called it.

It was after breakfast, and they were sitting on the broad verandah of the hotel facing the blue Mediterranean when Lorry first brought forth his books, and with a little preamble about his wish to teach her something more than she knew about the countries they were about to travel through together, he opened a popular history of Florence in the Middle Ages and began to read aloud to her.

Delia really tried to listen. She diversified the amusement, it is true, by tickling Lorry's nose with a blue cornflower; once she got up and ran to the end of the verandah to look at some street dancers in the road below, and presently she yawned audibly. Still, on the whole, she appeared to be fairly attentive and interested. The following day she had for-

Repenting at Leisure

gotten every single word and he had to begin the book all over again. Then they began to travel slowly through the towns of Northern Italy, and Lorry took her in the mornings to the picture galleries, and tried to make her understand and appreciate the beauties of the great masterpieces, pointing out to her the special features of each painter, and how they differed in style and execution from one another; every afternoon they explored fresh scenes—churches, palaces, old streets and historical ruins—and Delia yawned over them all alike. After a little while he discovered that it was like weaving ropes out of sand. Nothing made any lasting impression upon her, everything went as clean through her mind as if it had been a sieve. The passing moment was the only moment in life for Delia. A new trinket, a smart shop where she could sit and eat cakes and drink chocolate, even a toy stall at the corner of the street, with gaily-beribboned Polichinellos to be bought, these were the kind of things that amused and pleased her.

The history of bygone ages had no attraction for her. The picturesque old cities with their ruined palaces and venerable churches bored her, even the scenery scarcely arrested her attention; and as for the pictures, these

A Passing Fancy

masterpieces which he loved so well—the Raphaels and the Bellinis, the Peruginis and the Giorgiones—they only filled her with a weariness unspeakable.

Her eyes wandered dully and uninterestedly over the greatest pictures of the world.

‘Why do they nearly always paint the same thing?’ she would remark, cutting short some enthusiastic diatribe of her husband’s with a portentous yawn. ‘I am so sick of Holy Families!’

One day that they were in the Uffizzi Gallery at Florence she suddenly appeared to wake up into life.

‘Look, Lorry! Look quickly!’ she cried excitedly, catching hold of his arm, ‘there, to the right! Did you ever see anything so perfectly lovely?’ Her eyes were sparkling, her cheeks all in a lovely glow, a rapturous smile of intelligence illumined her face.

The poor man said to himself, ‘At last! at last! she sees something to admire of her own accord. Her mind is awakening, her soul is expanding! After all, my teaching and my efforts have not been altogether thrown away.’ His own heart began to beat a little in glad and responsive sympathy.

‘Which one is it, my dear?’ he asked her

Repenting at Leisure

quickly, looking about from left to right. 'What is it that you admire so much? Tell me.'

She gave a short laugh of derision, and tossed her chin contemptuously.

'Oh, you never see anything else but your stupid pictures, Lorry. I wasn't thinking about them at all, I was looking at the white chip hat that American girl who is stopping at our hotel was wearing; it was perfectly lovely—a cloud of lace and pink roses! Paris, of course; you have just missed it. Do let us go into the next room after her. I want so much to see it again.'

He gave her no more dissertations upon the Old Masters after that. And very soon afterwards he relegated all the books back again to their box, and left off trying to teach her anything.

For some reason or other Delia seemed to be incapable of improvement. She would sit and listen to him patiently enough, but her thoughts all the time were so evidently wandering in every direction, that it seemed sheer waste of time and breath to try and chain them down to any one subject. Often portentous yawns would disfigure her pretty face whilst he read and expounded, and although she remained quite sweet-tempered about it all along, she told him plainly enough

A Passing Fancy

at last, that to go back to lessons after she was married was really very disagreeable to her.

‘You see, women aren’t expected to know anything much,’ she said to him one day when he tried to awaken some gleam of ambition within her; ‘not the pretty ones, at anyrate, and I am pretty, am I not?’

‘Of course you are pretty, Delia.’

‘Well, you never tell me so, Lorry! You never pay me nice compliments like—like—other people used to.’

‘It’s not my way to pay compliments, perhaps, but I daresay I admire you quite as much as — “other people” do, yet that is no reason why you should be content to remain ignorant. There are plenty of women who are well-informed and clever, as well as beautiful.’

Delia shrugged her shoulders.

‘Well, I can’t see why they should be. I can’t see the least use of reading books and knowing things. As long as a woman is admired by men, and gets plenty of partners at balls, and knows how to dress well, I can’t see how learning about these stupid, fusty old people who are all dead and buried long ago can be of the least use to her. I can read and write and dance and dress—do let me be, Lorry! I do so hate learning things.’

Repenting at Leisure

She laid her golden head, with a little caressing movement, on his shoulder. He stroked it kindly, but he was grave-eyed, and presently he sighed.

‘I thought, perhaps, you loved me well enough to try and become a companion to me,’ he said gently, after a moment or two.

She opened her blue eyes in surprise at him; she had not the remotest idea what he meant.

‘But I *am* a companion to you, Lorry! Don’t I go with you everywhere?—tramping about these dreadful picture galleries, and standing about in those horrid, cold, stone-paved churches that are so full of draughts that it’s enough to give one one’s death. I don’t see how I *can* be more your companion than I am!’

She was his wife, and she was sitting close to him on the same sofa, and his arm was round her waist, and yet she had no more knowledge of him, or he of her, than if they had been denizens of separate planets.

‘Poor child!’ he said at length, with a little indulgent smile, ‘you are very tired of pictures, let us go to Egypt.’

She rather liked Cairo—the hotel life amused her—but she refused to go and see the Pyramids; and the notion of an excursion to the

A Passing Fancy

ruined temples up the Nile dismayed her. She said it would be such a dreadful waste of time.

He did not attempt to force her inclinations. He gave up the idea of Greece, and when the spring came he took her to Switzerland and the Tyrol. But the scenery pleased her no better than Italian Art. The *tables d'hôte* and the chatter of passing tourists were what kept her amused and happy. In the daytime she strolled about the streets of the town wasting her money in useless trifles and striking up mild friendships with the dinner acquaintances of last night over her little shoppings. At one of these Swiss hotels where they stayed there was an after-dinner dance. The company was exceedingly mixed, and Lorry did not half like the idea of her dancing with all these people. But Delia was perfectly bent upon joining the festivities ; she became wild with excitement, and begged so hard to be allowed 'a little fun,' that, not liking to spoil her pleasure, he ended by giving way to her.

She over-dressed herself for the occasion in a low white satin dress and diamonds, but she looked very lovely, and was by far the most noticeable person in the room. Naturally, she had a great many partners, and danced without ceasing. It did not matter to her in

Repenting at Leisure

the least that the men she danced with were anything but of a good class; as long as they danced well she cared for nothing else, and Lorry, leaning with folded arms in the doorway, and watching her with ever-increasing displeasure, had the mortification of seeing his young wife pass and repass him constantly in the arms of men whom he would certainly not have received into his house.

One of these partners of hers annoyed him particularly. He was rather a common-looking French officer with a particularly free-and-easy manner, and an insolent smile. It made Lorry's blood boil to see this fellow gazing with an amorous leer into his wife's lovely face and whispering to her words that he could not but believe to be impertinent, with his waxed-up moustache close to her little shell-like ear. Yet Delia seemed pleased and happy, and laughed and blushed as though she liked it! She danced with him often, much oftener than Lorry liked, but when he remonstrated with her she only replied he was by far the best waltzer in the room, and that she liked dancing with him better than with anybody else.

‘But he is not a gentleman, Delia!’

She shrugged her shoulders petulantly.

A Passing Fancy

‘What does that signify? He dances divinely. Don’t be jealous, Lorry!’ she called back laughingly to him the next minute as she was whirled away again in Monsieur le Capitaine Mercier’s arms.

It would be too much, perhaps, to say that what Lorry experienced was jealousy. It was rather the deep annoyance and righteous anger of a man whose pride is wounded at its most vulnerable point. To think that his wife, a Mrs Hatton of the Grange, should be capable of lowering herself to the level of these second-rate foreign tourists cut him to the quick. It did more—it filled him with disgust. And the second of the shocks which came to him about Delia fell upon him that evening.

She enjoyed this sort of thing, evidently, she was in her element, perfectly happy amongst these people. She herself was as second-rate as any of them!

Yet he swore to himself that at least she should not disgrace him. She bore his name, and that name she must be taught to respect.

When he came upon her the following morning in the grounds of the hotel—flying through the air between two pine trees on

Repenting at Leisure

a swing which had been put up for the amusement of the children in the place, her white muslin draperies blown wide by the current of the air, her yellow hair dishevelled and floating in a golden halo around her bare head, her laughter ringing loud and shrill, whilst the French captain of last night stood behind her, swinging her, with a will, higher and higher—Lorry felt that he had reached the limits of human endurance.

He ordered her curtly to descend at once from her aërial bench, and requested Monsieur le Capitaine to leave off his kind exertions, with a politeness as formal as it was freezing. He heard the young man mutter to himself, with a smile, as he caught hold of the ropes to stop the swing, 'Tiens! c'est le mari jaloux!' But as Delia did not understand French, he took no notice of this. He desired her briefly to go and put her things on and come out for a walk with him; and then she lingered to shake hands with her Frenchman, and to bid him an adieu that was certainly unnecessarily effusive.

'I am so sorry, Captain Mercier! I liked it so much, and it was so kind of you to swing me, and I do wish you weren't going away to-day,

A Passing Fancy

but I hope very much that we may meet again and have some more delightful waltzes together.'

The gallant captain laid his hand on his chest, clicked his heels together, and bowed profoundly as he thanked madame, in excellent English, for her polite and amiable wish, which he assured her he reciprocated from the very ground of his heart.

'This sort of thing cannot go on,' said Lorry, savagely, to his wife when they were alone together. 'You had better see about your packing up. I've had enough of foreign hotels; we shall start for England to-morrow.'

'Oh, don't be so cross, Lorry. You are just jealous, that's all.'

'Jealous! of that little bounder?' he cried angrily. 'I could not possibly do him the honour of being jealous of him, although I certainly don't choose my wife to make friends with men of that class. We have been abroad quite long enough, my dear, and it's high time we went home,' he added more gently.

Delia preserved her serenity; she very seldom lost her temper. She had the sense to see that he was in earnest, and she did not attempt to make him change his decision.

It was now June, and they set their faces towards England.

CHAPTER XVII

UNVARNISHED TRUTHS

WHATEVER delusions Mrs Doyne might have hitherto entertained concerning the efficacy of the methods she had prescribed to herself during the past year, these delusions were very speedily dispelled from her mind when she found herself—a few days after her return to Meadowlands—bicycling up the Grange avenue on her way to call upon Laurence Hatton's bride.

She had undoubtedly—in respect of the object she had had in view—entirely thrown away her time and her money. The innumerable pleasures and excitements of her London life, the never-ceasing whirlpool of constant gaiety and dissipation, had all left her in the end exactly as they had found her at the beginning. She became convinced of this fact as she neared the house, and by the time that she stood at the front door, ringing the bell, she told herself

A Passing Fancy

plainly that she had not got over it one little bit.

Her heart was beating, she turned hot and cold, and her mouth felt dry and parched as she inquired if Mrs Hatton were at home.

As she crossed the threshold she was filled alternately with a deadly terror of meeting Lorry, and an unspeakable yearning and longing to see him again.

It is needless, however, to say that of all these stormy emotions within, there was not the faintest outward trace to be detected.

Mrs Doyne followed the servant, who preceded her across the hall to the drawing-room door, with almost more than her usual self-composure and serenity.

She said to herself at that moment that the thing had got to be done, and that she would do it thoroughly. Laurence was her nearest neighbour as well as her oldest and her dearest friend; and whatever he had done, and whoever he had married, she could never by any possibility turn her back upon him, or refuse to be on good terms with his wife. There was a great sense of fairness and of justice in Ambrosia, and she possessed that gift, rare in woman, of putting herself into the place of others and of considering a situation from an

Unvarnished Truths

impartial and impersonal point of view. She had often told herself during the past few months that she had had her chances of happiness, and had wilfully thrown them away. How then could she justly blame Lorry for desertion or treachery? No man can possibly be expected to go on asking a woman for ever to marry him. She had said him 'No' once too often. How then could she complain because he had sought for happiness elsewhere? She had no resentful feelings with regard to Lorry—only—he might, she sometimes thought, have dealt her the blow with a less cruel suddenness! Yet, from the bottom of her generous heart, Ambrosia had forgiven him long ago for this, and she earnestly and truly hoped that she would find him now, contented and happy in the marriage which he had made.

But, with regard to Delia, it was an altogether different matter. She had never thoroughly forgiven Delia, and she continued to have grave misgivings concerning her. Nevertheless, she honestly hoped for the best.

Young Mrs Hatton was lying on the sofa doing nothing, when her visitor was ushered into the room—that is to say, her only occupation was eating chocolate creams, of which a box full stood on a small table at her side.

A Passing Fancy

‘I am afraid you have got a headache, Delia?’ said Mrs Doyne, politely, as the girl rose slowly from her sofa to greet her.

‘A headache? Oh, no, thanks. Won’t you sit down, Mrs Doyne? So you have come back to Meadowlands.’

The remark was obvious, and seemed scarcely to require a reply. Mrs Doyne sat down; Delia crumpled herself up again into a corner of the sofa. She looked very pretty—prettier than ever, Ambrosia thought. She had somehow expected that she would have shown some signs of awkwardness and embarrassment at this their first meeting, and she had even composed a little kindly speech in her own mind. She had meant to assure her that she need fear no allusion to the past from herself, and that bygones should be bygones, and the unfortunate episode of her engagement to Bernard should be as though forgotten between them.

But there was never the very least occasion for any speech of the kind. Delia seemed to have no recollection of the how, and the when, of their last parting. She was not at all shy or embarrassed; she did not appear to be in the least ashamed of herself.

‘How did you enjoy yourself in London?’

Unvarnished Truths

she inquired carelessly. 'I suppose you had no end of a good time? I wish I had been in London!'

'But you have had a delightful trip abroad—something very much better than a London season, I should say.'

'Do you really think so?'

'Did you not enjoy your travels, then, Delia?'

'Yes, in a way. It was rather jolly moving about and meeting different people constantly, but I got very tired of Italy, there are such a lot of tiresome sights—pictures and churches and so on—I did get so sick of them!'

'Oh,' said Mrs Doyne. Then after a minute she went on cheerfully, 'I suppose you are very glad to get home, then? Well, there is no place like home, certainly.'

Delia laughed; a short little snort of derision.

'It's deadly dull!' she said. 'I can't think how on earth I am going to exist down here. I haven't got a thing to amuse me! I wish you would persuade Lorry to let me give a ball—he won't listen to me.' Ambrosia's colour rose a little. The name of Lorry on Delia's lips gave her a curious pang, and what she said caused her an unforeseen moment of surprise.

A Passing Fancy

‘I don’t see how *I* could persuade your husband into anything if *you* cannot do so, Delia.’

‘Oh, he thinks such a lot of you, Mrs Doyne ; he is always holding you up as an example of perfection to me.’

For a moment or two Ambrosia was silent. She could not trust herself to speak. Was this the mere blundering of childish ignorance ? or was it the deeper insult of deliberate intention ? But Delia had no notion of insulting her. She was not conscious of any rivalry between herself and her visitor, for although she had not forgotten what Bernard had once said to her about Lorry’s attentions to his mother, she had never really supposed that any man in his senses could prefer a woman of Mrs Doyne’s age to her own fair self. Nevertheless, she resented dully and vaguely the implied superiority of the older woman. She was not very clever, but she had been clever enough to divine Lorry’s deep-seated admiration for Mrs Doyne. She knew that Ambrosia was Lorry’s ideal in woman, and naturally she did not like it.

‘I don’t fancy Lorry would care to have the Grange turned inside out for a ball,’ seemed

Unvarnished Truths

to be the only thing Ambrosia could find to say, 'and as to Mrs Makin—'

'Oh, Mrs Makin's a horror!' cried Delia. 'I can't bear her. I've begged and prayed Lorry to send her away, but he won't. You might ask him to?'

'Ask him to send Mrs Makin away? My dear girl, he would sooner cut off his own head. Mrs Makin was here before he was born. She is an institution at the Grange—she lived with Lorry's mother; besides, she is such an excellent woman, why on earth do you want her to go?'

'Just because she *is* so excellent, I suppose. Do you know that she wants me to give out stores and count over the linen and order the dinners? I never did such things in my life, Mrs Doyne!'

'Most married women have to do them, Delia. And really, since you complain of wanting an occupation—'

'I don't want occupation, I want amusement; somebody fresh to talk to, somebody young, who doesn't jaw about books or politics, or crops or gardening, as all the people who have called on me down here do. What a dull set they are!'

'Do you think so? Well, I always think

A Passing Fancy

that ours is rather a gay neighbourhood ; there are plenty of tennis parties, and picnics, and bicycling parties in the summer. I am going to get up a few myself presently, to which I hope you and Lorry will come.'

Then Delia said something very strange—so strange that Ambrosia sat and looked up at her for a few minutes without being able to utter a word.

'I do so wish Bernard would come down. Won't he be staying with you soon? He was so jolly and nice—I want to see him again.'

Had she *no* recollection of what she had done?

'You surprise me very much, Delia,' said Mrs Doyne, presently ; 'you—you seem to forget. Bernard is probably not at all anxious to see you again.'

'Isn't he? How nasty of him to bear malice! I don't. I'm quite ready to be friends. You can tell him so with my love.'

'Bernard is not in England. He is yachting with a friend,' replied Mrs Doyne, coldly. And then the door opened and Lorry came in.

And Lorry was by far the most embarrassed of the three. Set a woman between two men who have made love to her, and she remains complete mistress of the situation, and will carry off things with a high hand without turn-

Unvarnished Truths

ing a hair ; but let a man find himself in the same predicament, and he will not only feel a fool, but—what is far worse—he will look foolish.'

Lorry was so evidently awkward and ill at ease between the two women to whom he had made love, that Ambrosia was sorry for him. His averted eyes and hesitating speech, and limp, cold hand as it just touched hers, would almost have amused her had it not been Lorry. As it was, there was more pain than amusement in her mind.

His embarrassment was so evident indeed, that she felt it would be only a kindness to relieve him of her presence, and at the first opportunity she rose to take her leave.

She was therefore rather surprised when he said,—

'Are you walking? I will go with you to the gate.'

'I have my bicycle,' she replied, 'but I can easily walk a little way if you wish it.'

'And you might sound him about that dance, Mrs Doyne,' whispered Delia, anxiously, as she bade her adieu.

'I am afraid you will have to do your own sounding, my dear,' replied Ambrosia, smiling. 'I make it a rule never to interfere in other people's domestic affairs.'

A Passing Fancy

Lorry had preceded her to the front door. He took her bicycle from the porch and began wheeling it down the drive. They had walked half way to the gates before either of them said a word. It seemed as though neither of them dared to break silence. Yet in that very silence there were the elements of an immeasurable danger, for it was pregnant with a thousand unspoken things. Each felt and understood the peril, yet for whole moments neither of them knew how to avert it.

It is always the woman in these cases who rushes into the breach. Ambrosia spoke the first word. She had essayed to make some rapidly impersonal remark, to ask some trivial question about his travels or his health, or even to fall back upon that sheet-anchor of British conversation—the weather; but somehow nothing of that kind did she utter, only something that was so far from what she had meant to say that it was a surprise to herself.

‘I am very glad to see you again, my dear old friend.’ It was not much, yet it was enough. He stood still, and looked at her strangely.

‘Why did you drive me to this?’ broke from him hoarsely, and his face became suddenly changed—broken up, altered—grief and despair stared at her out of his miserable eyes. He had

Unvarnished Truths

never been a man of many words, and what he looked was infinitely more terrible to her than what he said.

‘I am utterly wretched, and it is your doing,’ he said.

‘Oh, hush, hush, Lorry!’ All at once she saw how pitifully he was altered and aged, the hollows about his eyes, the silver threads that were sprinkled plentifully on his head, the lines of care round his mouth.

‘God forgive me for saying it, even to you,’ he went on, ‘but I have made a terrible mistake.’

Then all that is best and noblest in woman awoke in Ambrosia. It was not in her to rejoice, as some women might have done, at this confession of failure, at this implied admittal that she herself still reigned supreme in his heart; her generous soul took no pleasure in the sight of his discomfiture. She was only sorry—infinately sorry, for a trouble so sore and so utterly past mending.

‘It is not like you to say that, Lorry,’ she remonstrated gently. ‘You will never say it again, I know, not even to me. You are far too brave a man to be disloyal. You are not the first who has made a mistake, but this is one of those mistakes which ought never to be admitted.’

A Passing Fancy

He hung his head abashed and answered nothing.

‘You have Delia to think of. Does not that thought help you?’ she went on. ‘Her life, her happiness to consider. Resolve that you will make her happy; her heart and her love are in your hands.’ He lifted his eyes and looked at her dully.

‘She has no heart,’ he said shortly, ‘and she does not love me!’ Then he laughed—a little bitter laugh of misery that was worse than if he had wept. ‘Oh, you don’t understand! You look shocked! Do you suppose that I would say these things if I was not sure of them? Do you think I would give it up and knock under without an effort? I said that too—what you say—at first. I said I would make her happy and devote myself to her, because of her love for me, because I believed in her love, and was grateful to her for it. I have never been loved by any woman, you know, Ambrosia, never, since my mother died.’

Ambrosia was silent. Rather than tell him the truth now, she would have died.

‘So when this child, like a little bruised butterfly, came fluttering on to my breast, I was grateful to her. I thought I would live to make her happy, and learn to love her for the

Unvarnished Truths

sake of her love for me. But she does not love me any more than she loved Bernard.'

'Yet surely—Delia is young, Lorry—her heart could be won, and she is very sweet-tempered and easily pleased; she cannot at her age be entirely heartless.'

'She is not heartless, but she has no heart. Don't you see the difference?—the hopeless difference? There is nothing to take hold of, nothing to grasp; nothing about her is tangible or responsible. It is like thrusting one's hand into an empty space that is filled with nothing but cobwebs. She has no principles either good or bad, no fixed purposes, no conscience and no sense of duty. She is the most extraordinary creature I have ever known. I do not understand her; I don't believe anyone has ever understood her. She has no affections and no passions, and her head is as empty as her heart. Everything about her, in short, is negative. She wanted to marry me for the whim of an hour; she is as tired of her marriage now as I am. Some day she will do something mad, or desperate, or idiotic, for no better reason. Any passing current of wind might blow her away in any direction.'

'What you tell me is very sad,' said Ambrosia, thoughtfully, after a pause. 'It

A Passing Fancy

distresses me deeply. Don't you think, perhaps, that it is because she has no occupation? If you were to try and persuade her to do things, to encourage her tastes?'

'Eating sweets and dancing are her only tastes. I have already tried to improve her education, which is lamentably deficient; but the effort was an utter failure, I had to give it up. She likes flattery, and will swallow it from any source, and my only prayer now is that she may never do anything to disgrace me.'

'Oh, surely not, Lorry, surely not!'

'No, I don't think so, partly because she is not in the least vicious; her faults are, as I said, purely negative. She has not strength enough to be wicked. Yet she might very easily be led away into doing something exceedingly foolish and injudicious. However, I am determined to guard against anything of that kind. I daresay she will have told you that she wants to give a ball?'

'Yes, she did. Why not, Lorry? Dancing is a very innocent amusement. I am very fond of it myself, as you know, and it might content her.'

'It would not content her in the least, and I am determined not to allow it. I don't

Unvarnished Truths

believe it to be wise to foster her craving for excitement. In a year or two perhaps—if she is wiser and more sensible by then.’

Lorry was thinking about Monsieur le Capitaine Mercier. He was not at all sure that that box of French chocolates that had arrived from Paris this morning had not been sent by that objectionable individual, and he felt pretty sure if he permitted Delia to organise anything in the shape of a large entertainment, that this Frenchman, who was her latest fancy, would in some way or other find his way to the Grange. It is wonderful how people who desire to come to a certain ball manage to insinuate themselves into a house where they are not invited, especially when there is somebody inside that house ready and willing to lend a helping hand. Ambrosia, who did not know all this, honestly thought Lorry would have been wiser to give in to his young wife’s wish. But she was above everything anxious not to seem interfering, so she did not press it. A moment later he asked her very earnestly whether she would help him.

‘I want you to know exactly how things are with me, Ambrosia. I did not, I assure you, mean to be disloyal to poor Delia; still,

A Passing Fancy

I feel I must tell you the worst before I can ask for your help.'

'Of course I will help you, Lorry; have we not always helped each other? Tell me only what I can do.'

'I think you might come over and see her often. A woman—especially one so good and wise as you are—can do so much more with another woman than a man can, and your influence—'

'Ah, don't you think she might not naturally resent any external influence?'

'You know best, of course. But I confess it would be a comfort to me.'

Ambrosia was thoughtful for a few moments, then she said, 'You may depend on me, Lorry, for helping you in any way I can. I mean to ask you both to dinner—to a formal dinner-party, I mean; then there will be other dissipations coming on. I will get Delia to come with me and try to make friends with her. I will do my best, you may be sure.'

He took her hand and pressed it warmly between his own.

'You were always the best and noblest of women!' he said, a little brokenly. 'Ah! Ambrosia, why could you not have loved me?'

Unvarnished Truths

‘It is too late to think of that now,’ she answered quietly, withdrawing her hand gently but determinedly.

‘Yes, yes ; too late, too late!’ he sighed deeply, even hopelessly, and wishing her a brief adieu, turned back alone along the avenue.

Mrs Doyne mounted her cycle and rode homewards. She was glad of the bodily exercise at the moment—infinately glad. Bodily exercise is so very often the only possible earthly solace for a sore heart ; it helps one over the difficult places in the most astonishing manner. It helped Ambrosia at this moment, for she was even able to see the humorous side of the matter.

‘It seems,’ she said to herself with a little bitter smile, ‘as if, marriage or no marriage, Lorry is destined to make love to me to the end of the chapter!’ And then, as the fresh breeze fanned her cheeks into a glow, the smile faded and the tears sprang suddenly into her eyes.

‘Oh, my Lorry,’ she murmured, ‘how sad it all is ! and how hard that I can never tell you now, how very, very dear you are to me !’

CHAPTER XVIII

THE LOVERS BY THE GATE

It must have been about ten days later that the weather turned suddenly very hot indeed. So hot was it that the river became impossible till after sunset, and to venture out at all in the middle of the day was a toil and a burden.

The garden lawns were scorched and brown, and the parched flowers drooped their helpless heads disconsolately in the borders.

After one of these very hot days, when she had finished her solitary dinner, Ambrosia strolled forth into the cool fragrance of the night air.

There was no moon, but a multitude of stars shed a faint and tender radiance over the sleeping world. The heavy odours of heliotrope and of nicotiana scented the whole garden; a nightingale throbbled forth a passionate song from the elm tops, and a frog

The Lovers by the Gate

croaked a single note down in the sedges by the river side.

It was an ideal night in June. Mrs Doyne's constant companion, a little fox-terrier, Viper, who was venerable alike in years and in pedigree, followed his mistress out of the house, and in order to give him a longer run, Ambrosia passed through the garden, opened the wicket-gate which divided the shrubbery from the meadow, and sauntered slowly over the grass towards the stream that formed the boundary between her own domain and the Grange property.

It was in this very field that she had come to grief whilst trying to put the bay over the hurdles, and had sustained that sprained foot to which she often put down all the rest of her subsequent troubles.

Not unnaturally, as she walked, she thought about Lorry and his wife.

The dinner-party she had given in their honour had taken place a few days previously, just before the very hot weather set in. The Vicar had taken the bottom of the table for her, and had duly conducted the bride in to dinner. The neighbours whom she had invited to meet them had been curious to see Mrs Hatton; and they had been also

A Passing Fancy

equally curious to see how Mrs Doyne would comport herself under the altered circumstances.

They went away firmly imbued with two convictions. Firstly, that mercifully 'dear Ambrosia' really never could have cared in the slightest for Laurence Hatton, as she was evidently quite reconciled to his marriage; and secondly, that they did not like Mrs Laurence Hatton at all. Delia had not achieved a success that evening. These excellent people, who lived in the country all the year round, who had been born and married, and would probably die in the same places, and whose views and conversation were possibly a little old-fashioned and narrow, bored her unspeakably, and she had not had either the wit or the breeding to conceal her boredom.

Her listless apathy had almost indeed bordered upon insolence, and twice during the repast Mrs Doyne had noticed that she was smothering a yawn behind her fan.

Now, whatever may have been the faults and failings of the good people of Eastshire, at least they were gentle-folk, and they knew a lady when they saw her, and could detect with the sharpest of eyes any falling short from the standards to which they were accustomed.

The Lovers by the Gate

When they went home that night they summed up Laurence Hatton's bride in one word—

'Second-rate.'

That damned her effectually and for ever, for unfortunately they were right. It was true. Poor Lorry was quite as well aware of it as they were, and already had suffered untold agonies in endeavouring to gloss over and smooth out the innumerable little solecisms of manner and speech which his pretty young wife was constantly committing. Ambrosia was also painfully conscious of Delia's shortcomings on the evening of that dinner-party, and she was unfeignedly thankful when it was over. She was sorry and disappointed too, for she was afraid that nobody, after this experience of her, was likely to take much notice of Delia, and that Lorry's home life would consequently be rendered all the harder.

She had, however, determined to persevere in her self-imposed task of endeavouring to humanise and befriend his wife. Nothing, she told herself, should ever cause her to fall away from the promise she had given him.

She went frequently to see Delia, she asked

A Passing Fancy

her to lunch and to tea, called for her in her punt or her phaeton, talked to her much and kindly, and endeavoured to arouse her interest in her surroundings, and to make her take a pleasure in her garden and in her household. It was, however, very uphill work, and Ambrosia realised more and more every day that she had possibly undertaken a task that she would never be able to accomplish.

Lorry, on his part, having failed in that matter of the books, had set himself now to work to stimulate his wife's interest in life by trying to initiate her into his favourite out-of-door amusements.

Last year he had taught her to row. He found that she had of course forgotten what she had learnt then, but when he proposed that he should resume his boating instructions, she declined abruptly; rowing, she said, made her back ache. She had not found this out last summer; but then that was because Lorry was something new and exciting to her then, because she wanted to arouse his admiration, and found boating a decent excuse for being alone with him.

He offered now to teach her to ride either a horse or a bicycle, but she was dubious, and altogether indifferent to both, and even the

The Lovers by the Gate

promise of a new horse and a new bicycle did not seem to hold out any equivalent inducements to her.

‘I will try if you like,’ she said listlessly, ‘but I don’t see what good I shall get out of it, and I am quite sure I shall never like either.’

She did try, but she would not or could not give her mind to it, with the natural result that she failed ignominiously, tumbled off, got frightened, and then prayed piteously to be excused.

Thinking over all these futile attempts, and wondering sadly whether anything on earth would ever awaken any gleam of intelligence or energy in this creature of cobweb, as Lorry had called her, Mrs Doyne found herself presently at the end of her own fields, close to the little stream, now, owing to the dry weather, almost dwindled away to nothing, which formed, as I have said, the boundary line between her property and Lorry’s.

A bank of woods, now sombrely dark under the shadows of the night, rose in a long wall of blackness on the further side of the ditch. At one place, half-way along the field, a bridge of planks spanned the rivulet, being immediately

A Passing Fancy

faced by a five-barred gate in the paling which enclosed the woods. This gate was always kept locked, as there was no regular road beyond it—only a narrow and very overgrown pathway occasionally used by the keepers. When Ambrosia neared it, she became suddenly aware of the sound of low voices in front of her, and by peering into the gloom she was just able to discern that a man was standing on her side of the stream, with his back towards her, leaning over the gate. Beyond him, so as to throw his figure into dark relief, which was indeed how he came to be at all distinguishable to her, were the dim outlines of something that appeared under the darkening shadows to be palely, faintly grey, and which Ambrosia rightly conjectured to be a white-robed woman's figure. She, apparently, was on the further side of the gate, and so deep was the shadow of the woods above and behind her, that nothing of her was visible but that splash of white that was not white at all, but only the faint reflection of it, indubitably proclaiming itself to Ambrosia to be a woman's dress.

A pair of rustic lovers, evidently.

‘And you, my friend Hodge, are trespassing

The Lovers by the Gate

on my property!' said Ambrosia to herself with a smile. But her woman's heart was always warm and tender towards a love-story, whether she found it in her own class or amongst the cottagers who lived about her gates, and she had no mind to assert her rights. She at once turned away in fact, in order to retrace her steps across the meadow, fearing that the young couple might see her and be disturbed by her presence. She remembered that there was a pretty under-housemaid at the Grange, and felt sure that it must be she. 'Poor girl!' she said to herself, 'why should she not be happy on such a night as this—alone with the man she loves? Ah! not for the world would I order her young man off my land, whoever he may be!'

Viper, it may be here stated, did not in any way share his mistress's discretion. At the first sound of the soft, murmuring voices he had uttered a yap of warning, followed by a succession of low growls. Then with a gruff bark he had scampered off in the direction of the gate, and almost immediately afterwards the pleasurable excitement of recognition agitated his whole wriggling body. He wagged his tail with vehemence, and pre-

A Passing Fancy

sently disappeared altogether in the darkness in close vicinity to the lovers.

By this time Mrs Doyne had turned her back and was walking away, but as Viper had not followed her, she turned round after a minute or two and whistled, then called him by his name. It was evident to her that Viper had found acquaintances in the couple of lovers, and was greeting them as friends.

As she stood looking back now towards the gate, she could see nothing whatever either of the pale white frock or of the dark figure of the man, and the voices were silenced. Evidently the pair had plunged for concealment into the shadows of the woods. And presently Viper came trotting back to her like a little white ghost flitting noiselessly across the grass. He seemed disturbed in his canine mind for a little while, for he whined repeatedly and rubbed himself against Ambrosia's skirts as though to say, 'I could tell you such a story about those people if I only knew how to talk!' She patted and spoke to him, and presently he calmed down, and by the time they reached the garden gate Viper had seemingly quite forgotten the incident.

Mrs Doyne very soon forgot it also.

The Lovers by the Gate

The next morning was a busy one for her. There were sundry village festivities in the air—the school treat, the choir picnic, and a special entertainment for the old people, which was Mrs Doyne's chief interest, as it always took the form of a long afternoon in the gardens of Meadowlands, with tea out of doors and a variety of entertainments of a mild description suited to the tastes and capacities of the old men and women.

With a view to these prospective excitements, Mr Storey came over after breakfast to secure Mrs Doyne's support and collaboration. He brought with him long lists of names, and a great many black-bound parish books. And for an hour or more business was the order of the day. At last everything was arranged and settled, and the Vicar shut up his silver pencil-case and began putting his papers back into his leather hand-bag.

'Very well, Mrs Doyne, now that I know that the dates will suit you, and what you are able to do to help us, we can proceed with the preparations. My girls shall see about asking the people, and save you every possible trouble. Sophie will call herself, no doubt, on you. It is very good of you to give us a band for the children's treat.' Mr Storey stood up

A Passing Fancy

and took up his hat from the table. Ambrosia rose too, feeling rather hot and exhausted by the interview.

‘So,’ he remarked, just as he was about to wish her farewell, ‘so you have got Bernard at home again, I hear?’

‘Bernard? No, he is still away yachting.’

‘Oh!—but Dove told me that he met him in the village last night.’

‘Mr Dove is not very brilliant,’ said Ambrosia, drily. Mr Dove was the new curate and he was not a very wise young man. ‘Mr Dove is mistaken. Bernard is not at home.’

‘Oh, I suppose he took someone else for your son. He assured me that he saw him, and I was certainly surprised, as I knew you did not expect him back yet. Dove admitted that it was nearly dark.’

‘Mr Dove’s imagination evidently carried him away. I have no idea when Bernard will come home; indeed, I should not be surprised if he were not to come home at all this summer.’

‘Ah, yes; of course I understand,’ the Vicar hastened to reply—the story of poor Bernard’s brief and futile engagement returning suddenly to his memory. ‘No; very likely, as you say, he

The Lovers by the Gate

will keep away, poor fellow! Much wiser—
very much wiser! Well, I must be getting on,
Mrs Doyne.'

And then the good man took his departure.

CHAPTER XIX

'TOO LATE'

IT was on the afternoon of the same day, at about five o'clock, that Ambrosia strolled out into the garden with a book. It was, she used to remember long afterwards, a charming little edition of *Aurora Leigh* which some friend had sent her by post that morning. Some lines here and there of the poem seemed to come peculiarly home to her; and having taken her favourite position in the hammock that was slung between the lime trees, she began to enjoy herself in a thoroughly lazy fashion. The flowers, the birds, and the poetry that found echoes in her heart, all blended themselves together for her into one harmonious summer reverie.

Presently the splash of sculls from the river hard by aroused her from her dreams and made her look quickly round, when to her surprise she saw Lorry by himself in the

‘ Too Late ’

dinghy, just in the act of pulling up at the Meadowlands landing-stage.

It was so cruelly strange, and yet so natural, to see him come to her in this informal fashion, that her heart gave a great throb of mingled pain and gladness. Oh! to be able to wipe out the past year with all its pain and suffering! to be back once again in the dear old days of long ago when Lorry used almost daily to scull himself down in the dinghy! Alas, how often she had been cold and hard to him in those happy times, wasting the golden sands of her life's best days and turning her back upon all that might have been hers if only she had reached out her hand to take it!

Never since his marriage had Lorry come down by the river to see her. Always, now, he arrived like any ordinary visitor, decorously and properly, at the front door, ringing the bell and waiting to be announced just as if he had been a stranger. With a little cry of pleasure she jumped out of the hammock quickly, and picking up her white sunshade from the grass, where she had thrown it down, walked down the lawn to meet him. He was all in cool summer white, and he lifted his straw hat to her when he saw her. What a clean-built, thorough-bred specimen of an English gentle-

A Passing Fancy

man he looked! What a charming smile he had! What clever eyes of clear blue-grey! How attractive he seemed to her altogether.

Ambrosia never remembered, in the days when he seemed all her own, to have had such thoughts as these about the charm of Lorry's appearance; but now that he was lost to her, all the merits of the thing she had valued too lightly before, because she had been too sure of it, assumed new proportions in her eyes. He smiled, and his smile held the glamour of sunshine for her; he spoke, and his voice appeared to her to be sweeter than the voice of every other living being.

'Please forgive this unceremonious intrusion,' he said, taking her hand. 'I ought to have come round properly, but I was in a hurry, and—'

'Don't apologise, Lorry. You know you are always welcome; I am so glad you came by the river; it seems like old times, you know.'

'Thanks. And I did want to see you quickly to-day.'

'There is something special?'

'Yes. I have had some letters by the second post about my property down in Wales.'

She nodded. She knew all about the Welsh property and the coal mine, and the trouble as

‘ Too Late ’

well as the uncertain profit which this possession of his had frequently caused him.

‘ Nothing amiss, I hope? ’

‘ No, nothing very bad. But I must certainly go up to London and see my lawyers ; and if necessary—and it is almost certain that it will be necessary—I shall have to go on down to Rwyddr to-morrow afternoon. The overseer has been troublesome, getting to loggerheads with the men, and making himself generally offensive. I expect I shall have to go down myself, and that, you know, will mean two nights away, though I shall get back as soon as I can.’

‘ Naturally. But perhaps, when you see the lawyers, they may be able to arrange things for you? ’

‘ It is just possible. However, what I wanted to ask you, Ambrosia, was—will you look after my little girl a bit whilst I am away? ’

‘ Why, of course! Will she come over and stop with me? ’

‘ Well, I hardly expect she will do that, but if you would go round and look her up to-morrow, and keep her with you during the day, it would be doing me a great kindness—only—of course, don’t tell her I asked you—she might—’

A Passing Fancy

‘I quite understand. When do you start?’

‘By the early train—eight o’clock. And it’s a long, lonely two days before the child.’

‘Yes, of course. You may depend upon me. I will do everything I can.’

‘Thank you, Ambrosia. What a good friend you are!’

They had found a shady seat beneath the trees. Lorry leant forward, prodding the grass idly with the end of his stick; he was not looking at her.

‘I wanted to tell you,’ he went on presently, ‘that really I think Delia has been happier and brighter just these last few days. She has been quite cheerful and lively, and has done one or two little things to please me. I think perhaps she is beginning to be reconciled to her life here.’

‘I am so very glad.’

‘Yes, that is what makes me regret all the more that I am obliged to leave her just now; it seems a pity to risk a parting.’

‘But it won’t be for long, and I will do all I can in your absence, and you will soon be back.’

‘Yes, in two or three days at latest, and I shall write to her. Well, I must be getting back now. I am so very grateful to you, my dear old friend.’

‘Too Late’

The tenderness of the last few words were almost too much for her. She could not trust herself to speak. They walked silently down to the landing-stage together.

Then just as he was about to untie the painter of the dinghy, Lorry suddenly turned round to her and took her hand.

‘One has mercifully always got a little duty to go on living for, you see. “Duty” is not a very seductive word, perhaps, but I daresay it is a more wholesome *régime* for one than great happiness would have been.’

He was holding her hand fast in his, and then something, the magnetism of his touch, perhaps, caused her to look at him straight in the eyes. Such looks rarely passed between them now ; as a rule, they were afraid to look at one another.

‘Oh, my poor Lorry!’ she murmured, below her breath, ‘if only I could help you!’

He tightened his grasp upon her hand for a moment, but his eyes fell away from hers.

‘I have made a horrible hash of my life, haven’t I?’ he said a little unsteadily, and with a pitiful, shadowy smile that went to her heart.

It was the smile that undid her. The tears rushed blindingly into her eyes.

‘Oh,’ she said brokenly, ‘do you suppose

A Passing Fancy

that you are the only one who has made a mistake? How is it you do not see—that I—I too—’ Her voice faltered and failed. There came a sudden darkness before her eyes, and in the few seconds of utter silence that followed, the river, the trees, the sunshine itself seemed to become blotted out into nothingness.

Then all at once sight returned to her, for his eyes—dear eyes she loved so well—seemed to be burning into hers. All the love and longing, all the hunger and the hankering of his life looked at her now out of Lorry’s eyes. Instinctively she drew back from him and put up her hand with a gesture of warning and entreaty. But Lorry was past all that. Woman-like, she had said too little—or too much. And Lorry could not stop there, he must have all the truth now. She made a feeble attempt to turn away from him, but he caught her arm almost roughly and held her fast, and when he spoke his voice sounded strangely in her ears.

‘I will not let you go,’ he said; ‘you must tell me now. The time for pretences between us is over.’ Then with a pathetic outcry of hopeless passion, like the wail of a soul out of the place of despair, ‘Ah! be just to me, Ambrosia! be fair to me! do not, for pity’s

‘Too Late’

sake, deny me the one and only thing that can ever make my life endurable again! Tell me the truth for God’s sake. *Was* it the truth that you said just now? Was it indeed a mistake, too, with you, Ambrosia? Did you, too, throw happiness away?’

There was a silence whilst one might have counted twenty.

Ambrosia stood facing him. A weaker woman might have tried to explain away her incautious admission; a vainer woman might have fenced with the truth whilst playing with her power.

But Ambrosia Doyne was neither weak nor vain, and she had the courage of her convictions.

‘Are you not a little ungenerous, Lorry?’ she asked, very quietly, and though she was very pale, her eyes did not quail or falter.

‘I can’t help that,’ he answered curtly. ‘I can’t afford to be generous. It means too much to me. Tell me, Ambrosia.’

A moment’s pause, then she smiled, a little smile, half sad, half playful.

‘Well, yes, of course,’ she said quite simply. ‘I was a great fool, and I made a horrible mistake! How is it that you never found that out long ago, Lorry?’

A Passing Fancy

There was nothing to be said. No possibility of any sort of reply to be made.

Lorry did one mute thing. He lifted the slender hand he still held, and just brushed it lightly with his moustache. Then he dropped it suddenly and got into his dinghy without a word, and pushed himself out into the stream.

But as he pulled away with long, swinging strokes up the river, the world seemed to have become a better place to Laurence Hatton, for, for the first time for many long, weary months, he felt that he was not alone in it.

When he rounded the curve of the river from which the last glimpse of the lawn and the garden could be seen, he rested for a moment on his sculls, and lifted his hat almost reverently from his brow.

‘God bless you!’ he murmured aloud, ‘my first, my best, my old love! Too late now!—too late! Yet never so long as my life shall last will I forget what you have done for me to-day!’

CHAPTER XX

A PROJECT OF PLEASURE

‘ARE you quite, quite sure?’

‘Of course I am, you little fool! What a timid little soul it is! What are you afraid of?’

‘Oh, but suppose we were to be late—suppose we were to miss that train!’

‘We sha’n’t miss it—I promise you that. Besides, even if we did, what would it matter? You say he won’t be back for two days; if you didn’t get back who need ever know?’

‘Don’t be so awfully wicked, Bernard! Besides, how could I account for being away? Somebody would be sure to find out. There are the servants, you know—that horrid old Makin!’

‘You could tell her you were going to stay with Mrs Johnson.’

‘I’ll do nothing of the kind, you naughty boy. Unless you promise me you’ll bring me back safe to-morrow night, I won’t go at all—so there!’

It was quite dark by the gate in the woods,

A Passing Fancy

and very, very close—the hottest night of the whole year, people said of it afterwards. They could not see each other's faces distinctly under the shadow of the trees, and they spoke in whispers.

‘Little witch,’ murmured the man, and his arm stole round her waist; ‘lovely little darling, how badly you did treat me!’

‘You can't say I'm treating you badly now, sir,’ and Delia put up her flower-like face close, so close to his that the fragrance of her breath swept his cheek and so he could not choose but kiss the soft rosebud of her mouth.

A little silence.

‘You are very naughty, Bernard.’

‘It is you who make me naughty, Delia. Oh! why didn't you marry me a year ago!’

‘You'd be very sorry now if I had. Think how tired of each other we should have been by this time!’

‘Do you tire so quickly, darling?’

‘Yes, dreadfully quickly. I can't help it, it's my nature, I suppose. How is one to keep on at the same thing without getting tired of it?’

‘You are tired of Hatton, then?’

‘Dead tired! It's so dull to be married to anybody.’

A Project of Pleasure

‘Then come right away with me altogether.’
She pulled herself free from his arms.

‘Now you *are* wicked, Bernard. I don’t want to do anything dreadful. It would be so very unpleasant and tiresome afterwards. People would cut me — and — and — then, perhaps, in the end, you would want me to marry you! Oh, no, I wouldn’t do such a thing as that for worlds! You don’t understand. I only want to be amused. If you’ll take me for a day’s outing on this yacht, I’ll come fast enough. It would be delightful, and if I get back by the last train I don’t see how anybody can be the worse. What a bit of luck your being here just now!’

‘Yes, it seems like fate, doesn’t it? We were not to be home for another fortnight, and then Lord George got this bad news about his mother, and so we put back for England at once. It was entirely his doing that we put into Eastport, because his people are in Scotland, and it saved him half a day’s journey, which, of course, as his mother is dying, was an object to him. So, really, it has all turned out wonderfully, for here am I, left in sole command of the *Mermaid* till he comes back. Eastport is a beastly dull hole. I don’t know what I should have done if I hadn’t remembered

A Passing Fancy

that it is only an hour by rail from Adchester, and five minutes on to Anderley. Well, are you coming to-morrow ?'

'Y—yes, I think so. What time is the train ?'

'Nine-fifteen.'

'And Lorry goes by the eight o'clock up to London.'

'That's all right, then. Will you meet me at the station ?'

'Are you sleeping here to-night ?'

'Yes, at the same place—the little inn at the station. They are new-comers and don't know me. But I nearly ran into that ass Dove's arms yesterday ; did I tell you ? I don't think he quite saw me, and it was getting dark.'

'I must go now, Bernard, I really must. Please don't try and keep me. Lorry will be looking for me, and your mother might come out again. What a fright she gave us last night ! and that beast of a dog of hers. I thought I should have died.'

'She couldn't possibly have seen us, it was too dark. Viper knew me, of course ; luckily dogs can't speak. Oh, *must* you go, Delia ?'

'Yes, yes, let me go.'

'One kiss more, darling. Will you *swear* to be at Anderley station in time ?'

A Project of Pleasure

‘Yes; and will *you* swear to bring me back by eleven?’

‘Of course; though it’s a pity, I think, you won’t stay longer.’

‘I’m not going to.’

‘Very well. I won’t urge it if you think you can’t. We shall have a lovely day, anyhow, if only we get a breath of wind—at present it’s a dead calm.’

‘I don’t mind that, I shall like it calm. Yes, we will have a ripping good time of it! It’s sure to be fine. Good-night, Bernard. Do you know, I sometimes wish I had married you after all! I really think you would have been more amusing than Lorry, and then he might have married your mother.’

‘Curse him!’ muttered the young man, savagely.

‘No, I don’t want to curse him exactly. But he *is* dull. He is always trying to improve me.’

‘What insolence! as if you *could* be improved! Why, you are just perfect, Delia!’

That was exactly what Delia liked best to be told, so she permitted another kiss on the strength of that speech. Kisses, in Delia’s opinion, ‘didn’t count;’ they commit one to nothing, and they leave no marks. She had

A Passing Fancy

kissed a good many men—or allowed them to kiss her—both before and since her marriage. The practice lay very lightly on her conscience, so lightly indeed as not to trouble it in the slightest degree.

She walked back alone to the house with unruffled serenity. She did not want Lorry to 'find her out,' certainly ; not because she thought she was doing anything wrong, but because he was frumpy and old-fashioned and prudish, and always 'made a fuss' if she tried to amuse herself.

She would have probably been very much shocked if anyone had called Bernard her lover. She would have replied at once that he was nothing of the sort, he was simply 'an old pal' with whom she was going to have 'a lark.' Where was the harm?

'I am sure it's dull enough at the Grange,' she said to herself as she neared the grey old house, looming dark and silent, wrapped in its mantle of ivy. 'Nobody with any sense could possibly blame me for trying to get up a little fun for myself. And I've never been on board a yacht in my life. How delightful it will be! so cool and fresh after all this awful heat. As to asking Lorry's leave to go—why, what a fool I should be to do that! for he'd say "No"

A Project of Pleasure

to a certainty, and then I should be driven into open disobedience. Whereas, if I just go and say nothing, he need never know, and will never be any the wiser. And the servants will think I've gone up to town for the day.'

Meanwhile, Bernard Doyne, slinking along under the shadows of trees and hedgerows, was making his way back by a circuitous route to the little Station Inn where he intended to pass the night.

Bernard did not, by any means, look upon to-morrow's scheme in the same light-hearted fashion. It was to be no day's 'lark' to him, but a determined, desperate resolve to steal away another man's wife. Hatton had taken her from him, he argued doggedly to himself, and it was only paying Hatton back in his own coin if he took her away again. His passion for Delia was the only real and strong feeling that Bernard Doyne had ever experienced. His love was not, indeed, of a very high order, but such as it was, it was intense and overpowering. He hungered for her beauty. The memory of those kisses, which to her had meant so little, set his blood on fire. He swore to himself that she should be his. He had loved her more loyally in the days when he had been honestly

A Passing Fancy

engaged to her and had looked forward to her becoming his wife; but her faithlessness and desertion had embittered and envenomed his affection, whilst at the same time the loss of her had fanned his passion into fiercer flame. And then, too, there was added yet another element to his unbridled desires. He hungered to be revenged upon the man whom he believed had robbed him of her. He had always hated Hatton. As a boy he had been jealous of his influence over his mother, and resentful of the good advice which, from time to time, Hatton had believed it to be his duty to proffer to him. When he grew to man's estate he hated him still more because he felt that Hatton disapproved of him and disliked him, and that he looked upon him in the light of a trial and a stumbling-block in Ambrosia's life.

Nothing on earth hardens a man so much as the conviction that he is thoroughly disapproved of and disliked. And then he said to himself, to crown all: this prig, this saint, this mealy-mouthed model of goodness, had come between him and the girl he was going to marry, and had basely and dishonourably stolen her from him! For that was always how it appeared to be to Bernard; and naturally there was

A Project of Pleasure

no one to tell him that the affair, as it really stood, bore a somewhat different interpretation. He would not listen to Ambrosia, who perhaps might have enlightened him, and neither Hatton nor Delia were in a position to discuss the case with him.

But now—now at last—Bernard told himself that his enemy had been given into his hand! Now he was about to pay him back fourfold for all that he believed he owed to him. He bared his head to the stars as he walked, and drew a long breath of relief and thankfulness.

Everything had played into his hands in the most wonderful way. The illness of his friend's mother, which had brought the *Mermaid* back to England a full fortnight before the end of her cruise; the chance which had induced Lord George Verey to put into the exceedingly conveniently-placed little harbour of Eastport; the hospitality which had made him press the use of his yacht upon his companion. Lord George had been profuse in his apologies to his guest, he was so sorry to cut short his trip, that he positively insisted upon Doyne's stopping on, and making use of the *Mermaid* for the rest of the time she was commissioned. He was to look upon her as his own for the fortnight, and the skipper was told to take his

A Passing Fancy

orders from Mr Doyne and treat him exactly as if he were his master. These had been Lord George's express wishes and commands. When first left alone, Bernard had found it rather dull, until he had suddenly recollected how conveniently get-at-able Eastport was to Adchester, and so on to Anderley by the branch line. The desire to see Delia again, suddenly awoke in him. Fortune favoured him; he had met her wandering alone in the shrubberies after dinner. Further meetings had easily been arranged between them, and a few of those kisses—so lightly given, so seriously taken—had been sufficient to rekindle the young man's smouldering passion into flame.

Then he opened his case to her—should he ever have a better opportunity than this of taking her away? But at the outset he encountered an obstacle. Delia did not want to be taken away: not to that extent! She did not want, she said, to do anything desperate and dreadful. Once, indeed, she had taken a strong step in running away from Mrs Doyne's house and throwing herself into Lorry's arms, but in that instance vanity and the desire of conquest had sustained her courage, and she had proved herself unusually and unnaturally brave. But then the case had

A Project of Pleasure

been different; there had been everything to gain and nothing to lose, for if Lorry had not succumbed to her appeal to him, she would in all probability have returned whence she had come, and would have married Bernard, and nothing would have been known about her vain attempt at securing for herself a better bargain.

But this was altogether a different matter. Delia was not of the stuff of which a really bad woman is made; for let it be always borne in mind that the capacity for strong emotion was left out of her. She had neither heart nor passion. She did not want to be wicked. As she had said of herself, she only wanted to be amused!

Foiled in his first efforts, Bernard determined nevertheless that he would not be beaten, and resorted to artifice. If she would not come right off with him, would she at least come for a day's cruise on the yacht? Chance again played into his hands. Hatton was unexpectedly going away for a couple of days. She was to be left quite alone.

The prospect of a day of change and excitement was alluring to her. She agreed to the day's expedition, and entered with zest into the details of the scheme. She was too young and ignorant—and, let it be added, too entirely cold-natured herself—to scent any danger in

A Passing Fancy

the plan. It did not occur to Delia to ask herself whether she dare trust herself to Bernard's care, or to speculate as to whether the temptation to take advantage of her folly might not prove too strong for him.

But Bernard knew what he was about perfectly, and as he slunk back to his quarters at the Station Inn, he said to himself that he had triumphed all along the line, and that Delia was his.

But neither to him, nor to her, did another and a direr contingency present itself, nor did the brooding wings of that sultry night suggest that possible solution of every earthly scheme, which should never be entirely absent from all human calculations.

For if it is a truism to say that we none of us know what a day will bring forth, it is at least equally incontrovertible to assert that not one man or woman out of a thousand ever takes that eternal uncertainty of all earthly affairs into serious consideration.

Yet even to these two unhappy young people there were not altogether wanting indications of that which the future might hold in reserve for them, had they only been wise enough to perceive them.

But neither of them were so.

CHAPTER XXI

MISSING

IMMEDIATELY after breakfast on the following morning, Ambrosia, in accordance with her promise to Lorry, set out to walk to the Grange.

The heat, even at this early hour, was almost unbearable. Not a breath of air stirred the trees, and the sun beat down with a fierce intensity worthy of a tropical climate. It was, in truth, too hot to walk ; but then it was also too hot to row or to punt, for the river was one blaze of golden sunshine ; to bicycle was equally out of the question ; and it seemed hardly worth while to take the horses out into the sun for such a short distance. So Ambrosia decided to walk. She took her largest sunshade and crept along slowly under the shadow of the hedgerows, and was unfeignedly glad when she turned in at the lodge gates under the grateful shadows of the avenue.

A Passing Fancy

Mrs Makin answered her ring at the front door.

'Dear me, ma'am, you are out early this hot day,' said the housekeeper, opening the door wide for her. Ambrosia stepped into the cool darkness of the oak-panelled entrance hall.

'I have come over early to see Mrs Hatton,' she said. 'I suppose she has breakfasted?'

'Mrs Hatton has gone out, ma'am.'

'Out already? Has not Mr Hatton gone?'

'Yes, ma'am; he left by the eight o'clock train.'

'And Mrs Hatton? Did she go to see him off?'

'Oh, no, ma'am; Mrs Hatton went out about half an hour ago. My master has been gone an hour and a half. I expect Mrs Hatton has gone to see the young ladies at the Vicarage.'

'Ah, very likely! Then no doubt she will look me up on her way back. I had better go home or I may miss her. But, in case I don't see her, will you tell her, please, Mrs Makin, that I hope she will come over as early as she can and lunch and stay to dinner? It is lonely for her here by herself.'

Mrs Makin agreed, and promised to tell her lady. She did not care very much about Delia, who was not exactly her ideal of what the

Missing

mistress of the Grange should be. But then Mrs Makin frequently comforted herself by the reflection that presently, no doubt, there would be 'an heir,' and then in that case much would certainly be forgiven to the heir's mother.

Mrs Doyne got back in due time to Meadowlands, but she saw nothing of Delia by the way. She sent the under-gardener across with a message to waylay her at the Vicarage, but Mrs Hatton had not been there. Moreover, she waited lunch for her, knowing her inveterate unpunctuality, for fully twenty minutes, but all to no purpose, so she was finally obliged to sit down to the meal alone.

Late in the afternoon she sent Trotter on a horse up to the Grange with a note, but the coachman came back with the note unopened. Delia had not been home at all.

Still it did not occur to Ambrosia to be uneasy, for there were fifty things that Delia might have done. She might have gone by train to Adchester to call on Lady Drumsel, who would very probably have persuaded her to stay on to dinner with her on hearing that Lorry was away. Or again, she might have easily gone up to London to see her cousin or her dress-maker, although, if she had done this, it would

A Passing Fancy

appear odd that she had not availed herself of her husband's escort. At anyrate, Mrs Doyne determined to send a note round again late in the evening, so as to secure her company without fail for the whole of the following day.

Towards five o'clock the sky became suddenly overcast, although the heat was in no way diminished, and by-and-by the rumble of distant thunder presaged a storm.

It became, after a little while, so dark that the day seemed to close in earlier than usual. Ambrosia half expected that Delia would come in at dinner-time, and again she waited for her hoped-for guest, but again the minutes passed away, and she did not come, so Mrs Doyne dined alone.

It was about an hour later, and quite dark, and Ambrosia had settled herself comfortably down to a particularly well-written novel, when she was suddenly startled by the loud ringing of the front door bell.

There was something in the abruptness and hoarseness of those reiterated notes that struck ominously into the absolute stillness of the hour; they reverberated with odd, throbbing sounds through the empty peace of the quiet house, awaking I know not what prescience of evil in the heart of the startled listener.

Missing

Ambrosia threw aside her book and sprang to her feet.

'There is something wrong,' she said to herself, with that strange instinct of calamity which always lies very near the surface with most of us.

She stood listening intently. She heard the opening of a door, the shuffling steps of the butler crossing the hall, then the unbarring and undoing of bolts and chain—then—voices.

She ran to the door and threw it open. In the dim gloom of the large, half-lit hall she saw Lorry. He came forward at once at the sight of her.

'You are back?' she faltered. He replied calmly enough,—

'Yes. I found after all that there was no occasion to go down to Wales, so I caught the six-fifty train back. I have come here to ask for Delia, but I hear she is not with you?'

He spoke quite simply and without the slightest excitement. 'I expect she is dining out somewhere,' he added in a matter-of-fact way, but he followed Ambrosia back into the drawing-room and shut to the door behind him. The moment that he was safe from the ears of the butler, his enforced tranquillity forsook him.

A Passing Fancy

‘Have you the slightest idea where she can be?’ he asked with evident anxiety.

‘Not the slightest. I went to the Grange after breakfast to ask her to come back with me to spend the day, but Mrs Makin told me she had already gone out.’

‘So she says. Do you know that she has never been home at all?’

‘Dear Lorry, don’t worry yourself. She must have gone to Adchester to see Lady Drumsel, and your aunt has kept her for the night. I really feel sure that must be it. Where else could she be?’

He shook his head.

‘My aunt is away in Ireland staying with her cousins, the Thorpes.’

‘Delia, then, must have gone up to Mrs Johnson’s.’

He was silent for a minute or two.

‘I tell you what I will do,’ he said presently. ‘I will go home and have the chesnut put into the dogcart and then I will drive up to the station and find out if she has gone anywhere by train—it will save time in the long run to drive. I will come back and tell you what I hear. Of course, as you say, it may be all perfectly simple. She believed that I was away till to-morrow or the next day; someone, no doubt,

Missing

invited her. If she has not left by train she must be somewhere in the neighbourhood. I—I don't like to go about inquiring—it looks—well, foolish.'

Then a sudden thought of terror flashed through Ambrosia's mind.

'Lorry, Lorry, the river!' she cried, catching hold of his arm.

'Yes, that was the first thing I thought about too, but, thank God, that is all right. None of the boats are out; I went at once to look. Now I am off; I will be back as soon as I can.'

She waited for his return in an agony of mind indescribable. It seemed hours before she heard the sound of wheels coming up to the door; it was really barely one. Although she had preached peace to him, in her inmost heart she was convinced that something must be wrong, and a thousand horrible conjectures flashed through her mind, every one of which, however, fell very wide of the truth.

At last she heard the welcome sound of wheels, and she flew to open the front door herself.

As she let him in, she saw that he was deadly pale, and that there was a look of blank consternation in his face.

A Passing Fancy

‘I am going off to Eastport by the midnight train—it’s a luggage train.’

‘To Eastport?’ she repeated, amazed.

‘Yes. I find that she took a ticket there this morning and started by the nine-fifteen. There is nothing more to Eastport to-night excepting this luggage train at twelve o’clock. Ambrosia, will you be a good Samaritan and give me something to eat? I have had no dinner, and I am famished.’

She went off at once herself to the kitchen departments to give the necessary orders, and it was whilst she was talking to Sims and the cook, and urging them to the speedy production of the best that was to be had in the house, that she heard a door bang violently upstairs, and encountered a blast of wind blowing down a back staircase.

‘There is a storm blowing up,’ was her thought, as she hurried back to her guest; ‘this will be the end of the hot weather.’

She found him sitting in the hall. He looked thoroughly done up, and had evidently sunk down exhausted into the nearest chair.

When she came to look at him more nearly, she was struck by the utter and haggard despair of his white face. It came home to her at once

Missing

that she had not yet heard the worst. There was more to be told.

She sat down by him and waited.

At last he spoke.

'I have not told you all,' he said, in a dull voice.

'No? Will you not tell me?

'She was not alone.'

'*Lorry!*'

'Can you guess who was with her, Ambrosia?'

He turned his pale face and looked at her strangely. She began to tremble in every limb. A blank horror stole into her eyes. She answered nothing.

'It was Bernard,' he said briefly.

'Oh, no, no!' she cried out almost wildly; 'don't say it, Lorry! don't say it! it *can't* be true! Bernard is still away in Norway, yachting.'

'He must have come back, for the porter recognised him perfectly—he had seen him also a few days ago. He believed him to be staying here with you.'

Immediately there came back to her mind what the Vicar had said to her only the day before yesterday—that Mr Dove, the curate, had met Bernard in the village.

And she!—blind, besotted fool that she had

A Passing Fancy

been! had pooh-poohed it, and refused to believe it! If only she had listened and believed, this terrible thing might have been prevented.

‘Oh, my God!’ she groaned, and her head dropped suddenly down upon her hands, as though she had been struck by a bodily blow. Oh, to think that this awful shame had fallen upon the man she loved, through her—through her son!

Yet Ambrosia was not the woman to knock under to any fate, however terrible. Two seconds later she had sprung to her feet.

‘I am going with you, Lorry,’ she said.

‘My dear girl, why on earth should you put yourself to so much trouble and fatigue?—a tiring night journey—a luggage train—I am going in the guard’s van—not a comfortable place for a lady.’

‘As if I cared! I tell you, I am going. This matter concerns me as much as it does you; it is through *me* that this—this fearful thing has befallen you; it is right and fair that I should take my share of the punishment.’

‘But it’s such a dreadful night, Ambrosia; it is blowing hard, and raining in torrents, and I have only the dogcart here.’

‘I don’t mind a bit, I can wrap up. See,

Missing

here comes your food,' as Sims at this moment was seen going in at the dining-room door with a tray in his arms. 'Now, go and eat, whilst I make my preparations.'

By the time he had eaten and drank, she was downstairs again, clad in a thick serge suit, with a serviceable ulster over her arm, and Ann was bringing a small travelling-bag downstairs into the hall.

The meat and the wine had revived and strengthened Lorry. He had regained some of his composure when he rose to greet her entrance.

'I shall never forget this, Ambrosia,' he murmured, as he helped her on with her thick coat. 'To my dying day I shall be grateful to you.'

'You are glad, then, that I am going?'

'Glad? Of course I am. I don't know how to thank you.'

'I am thanked enough, since you are glad,' she answered simply. 'And now I am quite ready. Let us go.'

CHAPTER XXII

A LONG NIGHT AND CONFESSIONS

It was a terrible journey.

The luggage train took very nearly three hours to reach Eastport ; and during the whole journey, the empty trucks rocked and jolted and bumped over the rails, whilst all night long the storm raged and howled with ever-increasing violence, and wild gusts of wind swept every now and again right through the crazy shelter of the guard's van. Once, for very nearly half-an-hour, they were shunted at a siding, during which period the angry elements shrieked and roared and howled in a perfectly deafening manner, so that the unfortunate travellers, shivering side by side on a hard wooden bench, were scarcely able to hear each other's voices, and even the faint glimmer of an evil-smelling oil lamp which hung above their heads suddenly flickered, and sputtered, and went out altogether, so that they were left in total darkness, until at length the guard

A Long Night and Confessions

returned and did his best to rekindle the feeble flame ; after which the train backed out of the siding at last and jolted on again.

Yet dreadful as the journey was, and cold and weary and miserable as they were, there were, nevertheless, certain compensations in their lot, by reason of which their physical sufferings were to a certain extent alleviated and mitigated. For at least, during those long night hours they were together, things were said between them which, but for the common misfortune which had overtaken them, and but for the wretchedness of that prolonged and miserable *tête-à-tête*, might possibly never have been spoken.

There was very little reserve left now between Hatton and Ambrosia ; the day for reservations was over.

It was all too late now, in the face of this dire catastrophe, to keep up the farce of a calm and equable friendliness that had never had any existence on either side.

And Lorry longed for her womanly sympathy and help. He was sore and bitter ; wounded to the very heart. He could not hide his desperate pain from her.

‘What hurts me the worst,’ he had said during the early stages of that dreadful journey,

A Passing Fancy

‘is the blow to my pride—the stain upon my honour! How am I ever to face the world again, after the shame and the disgrace that she has brought upon me and upon my mother’s name?’

Then Ambrosia, who never, if she could help it, believed the worst of a fellow-woman, spoke a few pleading words for Delia.

‘I cannot believe it of her, Lorry,’ she said earnestly. ‘Delia had not the depth or the strength of nature to be vicious. It is an odd thing to say; it is, I suppose, because all evil is only a perversion of something originally good in us, but I am certain that a strong nature must be at the basis of every strong offence. No one who is merely negative has ever the necessary force to commit a flagrant sin. There must be an element of courage and of will power in the active criminal. Now, we know very well that poor little Delia has no strength of character whatever. She is equally incapable, I imagine, of a great love, a great sacrifice, or a great crime. The essence of her being is lightness. Do you remember that you have called her a creature of cobweb? That describes her exactly. She is like a thread of fine gossamer that is blown about by every little breath of wind. Delia was not, I am

A Long Night and Confessions

convinced of it, a consenting party to any such fearful step as running away from her husband with another man. What probably happened was, that she was enticed away for a day's pleasure-making, and that by some mischance she missed the last train. We shall find her, no doubt, safely housed and dreadfully frightened at Eastport.'

'Yes,' he replied thoughtfully, 'that is my best hope too. But still, I know Delia to be very weak, and in bad hands who can tell what she might do? And—and how about Bernard, Ambrosia?'

'Ah, Bernard! there we come to another matter. Bernard is—unfortunately—his father's son!'

She was silent for a space. Then all at once she began to speak again, and she spoke about things that she had never yet told to any living being.

For she told him of the horror of those two years of her marriage to Anthony Doyne, and of that black abyss of a bad man's soul into which she, in her virginal innocence and purity, had once been forced to look. In brief, breathless words she described to him that terrible, unforgettable time—the crashing of her own ideals, the destruction of her illusions, and the sweeping

A Passing Fancy

away of all the landmarks of her happy, well-ordered girlhood. She spoke of her husband's brutality and infidelity, of his drunkenness and coarseness of mind: of the many terrible episodes of her daily life that had culminated at last in the final horror of his suicide.

'And the most terrible thing of all,' she added, 'was that when he shot himself I was glad and thankful that he did it! Fancy, Lorry!—to be *glad* because a wretched fellow-creature—one's own husband, too—one's child's father—had died by his own hand! And all these years afterwards I am *still* glad that it was so! Does this shock you?'

'No—no, my dear—I understand.'

'I—I, who would not willingly hurt a fly, I could not find in my heart one single grain of pity for that wretched man! I cannot feel it now—I can only remember the intense relief of that moment when they told me he was dead. And if that relief has been accounted to me for sin, then I am punished indeed for it through my son. Bernard is like his father. It would have been so easy for him to have been more like me. Many sons are like their mothers.'

'He is like you in appearance—'

She shook her head.

'Yes. But that is nothing. It is in his dis-

A Long Night and Confessions

position that Bernard resembles his father. I need not enumerate his faults—you know them nearly as well as I do; only, what you have never known is the pain and the horror with which I have watched those seeds of an evil nature germinating and developing and growing with his growth, so that no efforts of mine have ever been able to check them. I believe in heredity, you know. If a thing is born in one, if it is bred in the bone and in the blood, nothing that God or man can do, can eradicate or exterminate it. It is a horrible theory, is it not?’ and she shuddered slightly.

He was silent, not from lack of sympathy, but because he sympathised and agreed with her all too well.

‘That is why,’ she went on presently, ‘I dare not be sure that Bernard would not, if he could, work the very worst of evils to poor little Delia. In his brutal way I believe he loved her—and moreover, I know that he could not forgive you for marrying her. Why *did* you marry her, Lorry?’ she cried impetuously. ‘Why did you not leave her to Bernard? It would have been better, I think. They would have each had a better chance together.’

A Passing Fancy

After a short silence he answered thoughtfully and slowly,—

‘Far better—as things have turned out—far better. But, Ambrosia, do you know that Delia herself came to me and told me that she could not bring herself to marry Bernard?’

‘She said that?—But you?’

‘It is rather difficult to me to tell you how it all came about. But I think you will believe me when I say that there was no great ardour of feeling on my part. I did not love her—and yet, to be honest with you, I liked her very much. She seemed to me to be very sweet and winning, and I believed that she was in love with me. And I wanted to be loved so badly, Ambrosia! I was so alone in the world. You seemed so utterly unattainable—I was tired and worn out with hoping for what seemed hopeless. Then this child came of her own accord and crept into my arms and laid her pretty head against my heart! Well—I was a fool, I suppose! And then there was my aunt, who was always urging me to marry—and others—most of my friends said the same thing—and I myself felt that I was no longer very young—the years fly so quickly. I had noticed a good many grey hairs on my head, I remember! Perhaps if I did not marry

A Long Night and Confessions

soon it would be too late. All the same, I don't believe I should ever have gone out of my way to seek for an unknown wife; but just as I was beginning to believe that perhaps it was my duty to marry, she came. And she was so totally different—to—to—the woman of my dreams—such a contrast altogether, that the very novelty of her attracted me. Then, as you will remember, we were thrown a good deal together. You were laid up with that accident to your foot, you know—'

'Yes, I know.'

'It seemed that, without meaning to do so, I had won her love, and if I was not worth anything to you, I was perhaps worth everything to her—and so—and so—!'

In the darkness her hand stole out and met his. She understood.

'But as you know,' he resumed presently, with a sigh, 'it turned out all a mistake from first to last! She did not love me in the least. I found that out a week after our marriage. She had not the smallest grain of affection in her composition either for me or for anybody else. Love is left out of her. She married me for a whim—a passing flutter of gratified vanity—a childish fancy that perhaps she would have a "better time" as my wife than as Bernard's!

A Passing Fancy

That is what makes the look-out so black now if we find her safe. What chance have I of her future security?'

'I think the adventure will have frightened her, perhaps, and if we can remove her entirely from Bernard's influence—'

Lorry smiled.

'Unless Bernard has done his worst already, I am not afraid of his influence. You don't know Delia as well as I do. She will be quite tired of him by this time. But if it is not Bernard it will be somebody else—the first *table d'hôte* acquaintance whom she meets, a chance partner at a ball. I often think Bernard could not possibly have been the first of Delia's lovers.'

Ambrosia remembered what Mrs Johnson had told her, but, like the wise and true woman that she was, she held her tongue.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE FATE OF THE *MERMAID*

WHEN they got out of that dreadful guard's van, in the grey dawn of the early morning, they could hardly stand for the violence of the wind. There was no such thing as a fly to be got, so, having secured a sleepy porter to carry Ambrosia's bag, there was nothing for it but to walk to the hotel. Fortunately the rain had ceased, and Lorry gave his arm to his companion, and so together they battled their way down to the sea front. The sea, when they came in sight of it, was lashed into creamy foam, and great waves were dashing up over the esplanade. A portion of the sea wall had been washed away.

They had to knock up the people of the hotel, but in answer to their inquiries could gain no information as to the fugitives. They had not evidently been to this particular inn.

A room having been found for Ambrosia,

A Passing Fancy

Lorry took leave of her, promising to come round again at breakfast-time.

‘You will go and rest somewhere yourself, will you not?’ she said to him. But Lorry shook his head.

‘I cannot rest until I have found them,’ he answered. ‘I mean to search every house in the place for them.’

He had already ascertained at the station that a lady and gentleman answering to the description he gave had arrived at Eastport by a morning train.

Ambrosia went to bed, and so intense was her bodily fatigue that, in spite of her anxiety, and in spite, too, of the raging tempest of wind and waves outside, she fell almost immediately into a deep and dreamless sleep.

She awoke early, and got up and went to the window. The waves were running mountains high, and she could see great clouds of spray dashing up continually over the end of the pier that formed one side of the little harbour; the sky was very dark and lowering, covered with a thick pall of heavy clouds.

It is a singular fact that it was only at this moment, whilst she stood, half fascinated, half awestruck, watching those terrible and yet

The Fate of the *Mermaid*

magnificent waves rolling in one after the other, to break with a thundering roar upon the land, that the thought of the yacht came into her mind.

‘How came Bernard to bring Delia to this place?’ was the question she asked herself, and then immediately the right answer came to her—‘Why, of course—the *yacht*!’

The yacht must have put in here. That would account for his having come backwards and forwards to Anderley — would account, too, for his having taken Delia to Eastport; and then immediately followed the disturbing thought, Had they gone on board the yacht?—and—good God! were they on board her—out at sea—*now*?

Her heart gave one leap of sick dismay at the thought; she glanced at the monster waves, at the stormy sky, and she said to herself aloud,—

‘Could the *Mermaid*—could *any* eighty-ton yacht live in such a sea as this?’

She dressed quickly, went downstairs to the coffee-room, and ordered breakfast, and she had only just seated herself at the table when Lorry, looking more dead than alive, came into the room. His first words, as he sank down into a chair by her side, were,—

A Passing Fancy

‘What was the name of the yacht Bernard has been cruising on?’

‘The *Mermaid*.’

He lifted his hand sharply and let it fall back heavily again upon the edge of the table—the gesture was one of despair.

‘Then God help them!’ he said briefly.

‘You mean—that—that—?’ she faltered.

‘I mean that the *Mermaid* left her moorings in the harbour yesterday morning at about half-past twelve o’clock—shortly after the arrival of the train from Adchester—and, as far as I can gather, Bernard and Delia were on board her. They were to go for a short cruise. They must have encountered the full fury of the storm. The yacht has not yet come back.’

A few moments of silence. Then Ambrosia remembered, as she believed, a gleam of comfort.

‘The *Mermaid* belonged to Lord George Verey. Bernard was with him—he must have been on board her too—at least they did not go alone!’

‘Unhappily, I find that they did. Lord George put in here about a week ago. He had, it seems, been called away to Scotland by some family trouble. He went away at

The Fate of the *Mermaid*

once. Bernard was left in charge of the *Mermaid*.'

'She was a fine vessel, I believe, Lorry; she may have been driven out to sea. When this storm abates she will come in safely.'

'Yes, that, of course, must be our hope.'

'And we cannot possibly condemn Delia unheard,' went on Ambrosia. 'No doubt she meant to return in good time. She must have been in despair, poor child; what a night she must have had!' She could scarcely pity Bernard. Why had he enticed Delia away? He should have known better; he was much the most culpable of the two. 'And,' continued Ambrosia, gently, 'when the yacht does come back—and we must wait on here, must we not? till she does—you will forgive Delia if you can, won't you, Lorry?'

'God knows that I will forgive her if it is possible—and if—if I ever have a chance of doing so!' he replied earnestly.

He could not bring himself to tell Ambrosia that the gravest fears were entertained in the town concerning the safety of the yacht. The *Mermaid*, he had been told, although well fitted up and comfortable, was not looked upon as a very seaworthy boat. She was

A Passing Fancy

old, and her insurance, he had discovered, was unusually high.

Well—the story of Delia's life ends here! Lorry never saw her again. In a storm she had come to him—in a storm he lost her. And to the very end of his life he never lay awake listening to the howling of the wind and the rushing downpour of the rain without being reminded of that poor, little, foolish wife who had come tapping at the window-pane, once on a wild, rough evening, to cast herself upon his protection, and who had fled from his house to perish, on just such another night of storm.

Poor, little, soulless, brainless thing! In time he grew to think of her only with sadness and with pity. She was so young, so pretty, so utterly irresponsible, that it was difficult to judge her according to the standards meted out to others. Surely Delia was one of those 'weaker ones' of whom little is required and to whom perchance much will be forgiven.

In time, too, he learnt to look leniently upon her offence, and to think with Ambrosia that she had not meant to bring any disgrace upon him. It was indeed easier to believe of a creature so light as Delia, that a day's pleasure-

The Fate of the *Mermaid*

making—the ‘stolen sweet’ of a spoilt child—had been more probably her object than any serious intent of wilful wrong-doing. And it was quite in accordance with her careless nature that she should have been foolishly heedless of the darker interpretation that the world might easily give to her escapade.

And then—as though to silence all argument and all blame—she was dead! Drowned in those rough, cruel waves that must very soon have buffeted the life out of her fair and fragile body. How, in the face of such a pitiful fate as this, was he to be hard and unforgiving to the memory of her?

There had never been much hope of the *Mermaid's* return after the first twenty-four hours. Nevertheless, Lorry and Ambrosia remained for one whole week at Eastport, by which time every chance of the yacht's safety had entirely faded away.

Every day, and all day long, they had paced the shore together, looking out to sea with straining eyes for the white sails of that pleasure ship that never came back any more.

The storm wore itself out as storms do, and was succeeded by a long period of summer calm, and the cloudless skies and glassy sea smiled at one another in cruel mockery over

A Passing Fancy

the mad havoc they had wrought together. 'We are so great and ye so small, oh, men!' they seemed to say. And all the time they held their dread secrets fast locked and hidden in unfathomable deeps.

One secret more, one more mystery that none might ever solve, one other riddle, unreadable for ever, had now been added to that long, long list to which there will never be any and, until sea and sky have ceased to be.

This was the tragic story of the last cruise of the *Mermaid*.

When that week of watching and waiting for what they knew was past all hope was over, Ambrosia went home, whilst Lorry went up to London, on the forlorn chance of gleaning some shred of information concerning the fate of the missing yacht.

He haunted Lloyd's offices in vain; no one could tell him anything.

One day he ran against Lord George Verey, who had also come to Lloyd's on the same errand. He questioned him eagerly, but Lord George believed his yacht to be a total loss, in proof of which he had come to look after his insurance.

Lord George was very savage about the loss of his yacht, which, indeed, he seemed to con-

The Fate of the *Mermaid*

sider as a far more serious matter than the consequent loss of life. He admitted, indeed, to Lorry that he was, of course, sorry for poor Doyme, but added that he had only himself to thank for his fate, as he had no earthly business to take the *Mermaid* out of harbour in such weather. He deserved to be drowned, he remarked; doubly so for taking a lady out, as he understood him to have done. Lord George couldn't think what his skipper had been about to consent to such a foolhardy expedition—the fellow must have been drunk, he supposed. Well, he should know better another time than to lend his yacht to a friend, that's all.

So after due time had elapsed, hope was abandoned, and Lord George received his insurance money, and life went on again much the same as if the *Mermaid* had never existed.

Down at Meadowlands Ambrosia had clothed herself in mourning garb for the son who during his life had never caused her anything but pain and trouble, but who, by reason of his sad and tragic end, found at last a place very near her heart, notwithstanding the fact that she was never able to rid herself of the suspicion of Bernard's guilty intentions with regard to Delia.

But to Delia, Mrs Doyme always gave the full benefit of the doubt. And it was mainly owing

A Passing Fancy

to her that Hatton's memory of his poor little drowned wife grew to be entirely free from all anger and bitterness.

Ambrosia was so sure of Delia's innocence that in time nobody else doubted it either, and it was because of her staunch and generous partisanship that a perfectly simple explanation was generally given to the fatal event which created so much temporary excitement and sympathy in the county of Eastshire.

The local papers spoke vaguely of 'a picnic party' on board the *Mermaid*, of a pleasure cruise, destined to last a couple of hours at most, and of the 'gay company' who had started in the morning to find their graves in the angry sea before night. And they deplored, in well-chosen language, the sad fate of the youthful wife of Mr Laurence Hatton of the Grange, Anderley, who was unluckily amongst those who perished in the ill-fated yacht.

It was generally supposed, moreover, that Mrs Hatton had gone to Eastport to join in that trip on the *Mermaid* with her husband's full knowledge and consent. So the voice of scandal was hushed, and Delia's memory was not impugned.

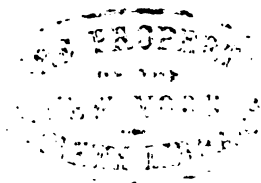
And for this, too, Lorry had to thank Mrs Doyne. But then, as he used always to say

The Fate of the *Mermaid*

in after days, had he not everything in the world to thank her for?

For I am speaking now of a time long afterwards when Ambrosia was Mrs Doyne no longer, and when Lorry had found that haven of true happiness into which a man enters when he takes to his arms the one woman on the whole earth who, be she young or be she old, alone is best suited to himself—she who, above all other women, fulfils to him every dream of his heart, every aspiration of his soul and every need of his brain.

THE END



Colston & Coy. Limited, Printers, Edinburgh.

